

The Advancement of Humanity

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It is estimated that the universe as we know it came into existence about 15 billion years ago. The age of the planet Earth is estimated at about 5 billion years. Hominid ancestors appeared about two and a half million years ago. *Homo sapiens* emerged about 40 thousand years in the past, then surviving its Neanderthal cousins. The human species engaged mostly in hunting-gathering-scavenging until around 12,000-10,000 years ago, when the first agricultural settlements began to appear. A dramatic way of illustrating this oft-told story (which constantly changes in detail, though not substance as new archaeological “digs” uncover new material) is to start at one end of a blackboard and go all the way across till the opposite end and then add a point. That point marks the moment when the human species first appears.

That we know all this is part of the advancement of humanity itself. It has been learned in the course of our evolution. The theory of evolution as explained by Darwin was biological in nature. His great work, *The Origin of Species*, traced the ways in which natural selection (to which he later added sexual selection) was the mechanism leading to the production of new species. With incredible detail, the English naturalist drew upon field after field – histology, embryology, comparative natural history, etc. – to show his theory in operation. His method was that of consilience, where numerous phenomena could all be subsumed and explained under one convincing explanation. [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#)

As we know, Darwin's theory of evolution required millions and millions of years for it to make sense. It was geology that prepared the way for Darwin; and, indeed, he started in that field. In the early nineteenth century William Buckland [\[2\]\[#N2\]](#) established the global nature of the earth. Charles Lyell followed him and established the fact that transformations throughout the earth occurred in similar ways everywhere and at all times in a regular fashion, and on a huge time scale. When the young Charles Darwin shifted his attention from geology to natural history, he drew upon the notion of consistent transformation occurring over enormous eons of time.

Starting with the *Voyage of the Beagle* and then *The Origin of Species* he demonstrated how evolution worked by natural selection. In the *Origin*, Darwin stopped before Man. That barrier was transcended in *The Descent of Man*, where Man's descent from more primitive forebears was described along with pages and pages devoted to the role of altruism and morality as an intrinsic part of survival of the fittest. Thus, Darwin's theory of biological evolution thrust itself to the very edge of cultural evolution. That is the momentous shift that occurred some 40,000 years ago.

It has taken on the rubric of “The Ascent of Man”. [\[3\]\[#N3\]](#) I want to claim that, heuristically, it is better thought of as “The Advancement of Humanity.” This is a story of how *Homo sapiens* became aware that he was human and what that entailed. It is an unfinished story, a process still under way. And a construction, still being created.

It is a story that can be told from many vantage points. The rise of civilization can be seen as originating in the Mesopotamian region. Ancient Egypt can make the same claim. China is another candidate. In any case, similar features can be found in all three areas. The emergence of written languages – an incredible

development – is one feature as are urban centers. In such centers, social stratification arises: priests, warriors, traders, and peasants fill definite niches.

Astronomy comes upon the scene. It serves mundane agricultural needs, as well as religious ones. In his wonderful book, *The Copernican World and the Rise of Modernity*, Hans Blumenberg speculates that the arboreal forebear of modern man came down from the trees and stood upright on the savannah. All sorts of consequences followed. For one he could see the horizon and the heavens; thus the beginnings of astronomy. For another he could copulate face to face. A surge in a new kind of intimacy was possible. The human is one of the few species that exhibits sexual drive throughout the year, and not just during rutting time. The constant libido helps foster a family that stays together.

For most of its existence, the human species has lived by hunting and gathering. Then about 12,000-10,000 years ago agricultural settlements began to appear. This is the way of telling the story of the rise of civilizations. We know of these “happenings” by the very tools of knowledge that subsequently developed: paleontology, archeology, and linguistic studies. We are talking then of a species that can live in the torrid tropics, but also the frigid Arctics. It is the ultimate predator, able to eat birds of the air, all other animals on the earth, and fish and shellfish from the sea.

The bones of the very first humans are found with tools besides them. The fact is that we cannot think of *Homo sapiens* without tools, no matter how primitive: flaked stones, axe handles, and later bows and arrows. Human evolution is a matter of co-evolution of man and machine. [4],[#N4]. From these early tools to the computer on which I type this statement to the huge particle accelerator at CERN, where the Higgs boson has just been found we can see extensions of human power whether in terms of might, sight, hearing, and all the other senses. The discovery and domestication of fire was a major step, followed by many other advances in the amount of energy at human disposal.

This brings up the question of “progress.” Much confusion reigns in the subject mainly because of an inclination to treat it as a monolith, when clearly it requires differentiation. A bad conscience on the part of many Westerners, commendable in some ways, and an overdose of reflectivity on the part of intellectuals may account for this attitude. Clearly, if we look at science and technology there has been progress, in the sense of humans gaining greater control over their environment by means of tools and machines; these, in turn, facilitate greater scientific understanding.

A major reason for rejecting this fact is, or so it is claimed, that such accomplishments are not seen as accompanied by moral progress. Many see drones as worse than spears. Artificial satellites may enable computer connections, but they may also lend themselves to nefarious military use. One of the most savage denunciations of science was delivered in the eighteenth century by Jonathan Swift, who did not deny its “progress” but deplored its results.

Swift was hardly a romantic, but Romanticism had affinities with his stance. A counterpart of the acerbic Swift was the lachrymose Rousseau. The latter appealed to an idyllic “nature,” before it was spoiled by the coming of civilization. There is a utopian quality to Rousseau's vision, although it looks to the past rather than the future. In short, he denied the idea of progress, hook, line and sinker. He threw out the baby with the bath.

He was wrong. A century before him, Francis Bacon had written *The Advancement of Learning*. In this book and in his *Novum Organum* he described how knowledge beyond that of the ancients had taken place and outlined the method and the needed institutions by which further advances could be made. Subsequently, the historical record has proven that Bacon was right.

Has progress taken place in other spheres? Art is reflective of the society in which it is produced. In principle, then, ancient African art is as advanced as twenty-first-century Western art. However, connoisseurs make distinctions between better and lesser pieces of African sculpture; and modern artists such as Picasso have borrowed heavily from the African examples. Arguments can also be made in terms of increased complexity; but this is a landmine. In short, the issue is an ambiguous one.

The case for literature may be a stronger one at first blush. More complicated societies might be presumed to produce “better”, deeper literature. This is hardly a strong argument. As the old saying has it, “*de Gustibus, non Disputantis.*” Other scholars have wrangled over this subject in more informed terms than I; and I shall therefore leave it at that.

War, that is, organized violence, is intimately and increasingly linked to technology and science. For example, ARPANET, a branch of the US Defense Department, funded the initial research into computer use. Example after example could be given in regard to land, air and sea operations. Some of the money goes to pure research; a large part to applied research. In our globalized world, satellites and drones go whizzing above us in the sky.

The work of the German sociologist, Norbert Elias, and subsequent proponents of his work bear heavily on our account. Elias is concerned in his *Civilizing Process* and his *The Court Society* to ground his theory of figurations in precise historical detail. He describes how violence has become more and more concentrated in the hands of larger state units, which seeks a monopoly of it within its own borders, and who then wage war against similar entities.

Going further back in time, Johan Goudsblom, a student of Elias, examined the way a military caste formed at the time 10,000-12,000 years when agriculture, facilitated by fire clearing the land, first developed. Fixed settlements, gradually becoming cities, required a specialized military caste to defend themselves.

Even earlier a priestly caste emerged. As Goudsblom explains, “people had to have knowledge of the plants and animals and of the conditions favoring or impeding their growth” (in Goudsblom, Jones and Mennell, 1996: 40). It was the priests who claimed that knowledge. Looking at the skies, they could also claim that their knowledge came from the gods. In any case, that knowledge was advanced knowledge. Progress in this sphere was evident.

But what of the moral sphere? I want to make the case that progress has also occurred in this realm. Think of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery (though pockets still exist). A condition of humankind for millennia, it was declared illegal and the trade abolished by the British in the nineteenth century. It did require a Civil War in America before it could be truly said that it had been vanquished. Still, a landmark had been reached in human history.

In the middle of that same century, the British philosopher, John Stuart Mill, hailed what he called “The Domestic Revolution”. [5][#N5]. The subjection of women was to be at an end. Mill was too optimistic. It has been a long drawn out fight, even in the so-called advanced countries, and markedly less successful in other parts of the world, especially in the Islamic Middle East. The banner, however, had been hoisted and the battle continues.

The rights of women have been part of the larger struggle for human rights. This is a monumental step for humankind. It comes from a Hegelian-like moment when the concept of humanity comes down from the heavens and begins to manifest itself on earth. It begins at the dawn of the computer age. In the middle of the nineteenth century Charles Babbage built his “difference engine”, a successor to the abacus, and a forerunner of the modern computer.

Up until the end of World War Two most historians thought of the previous 300 years under the rubric of Modernity. It was a professional concern, the word hardly known or used by most lay people. After 1945, however, a new periodization came into currency: globalization. In this case, the general public knew and used it in everyday life. It marked a new era in human existence. It was characterized by a number of factors, even though economists saw it through one eye, as characterized solely by the world-wide extension of the free market.

The economic did comprise an important part of the story. It was only one part of the elephant, however, with other parts being just as, if not more, important. A concatenation of factors were, and are, at play. I want to address them under the heading of the concept of Humanity.

In 1945-46 the Nuremberg Trials took place. They mark a momentous moment in history. Often overlooked is the fact that for the first time in human history aggressive war – organized violence – was declared a crime. It is hard to exaggerate this shift in attitude in regard to humankind. It is as if the nature of the species had changed. Not that peoples themselves had changed, but rather the societies and institutions in which they lived. For over 40,000 years *homo sapiens* had engaged in war; now it was declared a *crime*.

It was part of a general indictment concerning crimes against humanity. The roots of this idea can be found as early as 1913 (and traces even earlier) in regard to the Turkish “genocide” (a hotly debated topic) of their Armenian population. [6][#N6] At first labeled crimes against Christian civilization and humanity, the first part was removed as hurtful to Muslims. The broader connotation of crimes against humanity remained. The dominance of the notion of genocide in this formulation was gradually displaced in the list describing such crimes. With the phrase “crimes against humanity” the question naturally arises: what is this humanity that is being sinned against? At this point the term humanity comes down from the philosophical heavens and takes on real existence on this earth. It becomes an active force, potentially exercising sovereign powers. One example is the ICC. With good fortune, it may be a harbinger of more powerful and extensive international institutions devoted to peace and justice in the world.

This process is facilitated by other post World War Two developments. The lofting of artificial satellites and the landing of a man on the moon, the spread of personal computers linked to one another via satellites, these have made for an extraordinary rise in global existence and awareness, and in global interconnectivity and interdependence, the very definition of globalization. The growing currency of the word “globalization” in the 1950s-1980s is a testament to the change in consciousness.

The dropping of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima toward the end of World War Two has been described as the first global event. [7][#N7] With the moon landing, said to have been witnessed live by over 400 million people around the world, humanity could look back on its common home, Planet Earth. The logo of the Blue Planet became a universal symbol, uniting all peoples. With the computer revolution, people everywhere were able to connect with one another immediately in real time. Thus the ideal became real.

The global is always local. Its presence is also different in different parts of the world, and with differential force and consequences. Some people argue about whether it is producing homogeneity. Of course it is producing homogeneity in some ways and heterogeneity in others. So, too, global consciousness is stronger in some places and weaker in others. These become research problems to be executed on the local as well as the global scale.

What is clear, however, is that, as part of globalization, what I have called elsewhere a “Judicial Revolution,” has been occurring (Mazlish, 2009). Highlights in this development have been the Nuremberg Trials, followed by the Yugoslav and Rwanda Trials, and culminating for the moment with the creation in 1998 of the

International Criminal Court. [8][#N8]. One must step back from the incessant small wars and turbulence of our time to see the extraordinary accomplishment in terms of international law and the pursuit of justice.

Some have asserted, in fact, that there has been a long-term decline in violence. Foremost among them has been Steven Pinker (2011), with his *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Using extensive statistical and narrative evidence to make his case, Pinker, an evolutionary psychologist, favors us with an over 700 page tome. We are almost borne down by its sheer weight. I myself, as an historian, am not persuaded. Nor is Timothy Snyder, another historian. His review of Pinker's book in *Foreign Affairs* (Jan-Feb, 2012) must be read.

Of course, in Pinker's favor is the fact that war among the major European powers is more or less now inconceivable. The age-old enmity of France and Germany has given way to the European Union. While conflict can, and has, erupted in such areas as the Balkans, it is the exception. A more global view suggests Pinker's limitations, as well as our forgetting the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and the fire-bombing of Dresden during WW II. Even worse is the ignoring of the savage civil wars in parts of Africa.

Nevertheless, as we have seen there have been achievements. We need to build on them. Visible symbols of Humanity must become widespread, days devoted to its recognition, as with Earth Day, should be organized, and web sites hosting and putting in touch Friends of Humanity would be helpful. Research needs to be stimulated. For example, an anthropologist should be implanted among UN troops to see if these soldiers develop any sort of identity beyond that of their own country.

An even more important project would be to study the development of an international civil service. This should be done in figurational terms. Where Elias had studied eighteenth-century French court society, now the need is to study twenty first century international society. It may require a team effort, but in these days of instant computer accessibility such an effort is more feasible than ever before.

To summarize: long-term global processes should be studied in Elias-like terms. It should have two major results. One is greater understanding of our present situation and how we have gotten there. The other is to foster the project of Humanity itself. The Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (2002) has written eloquently about what he calls "dynamic nominalism," the way in which once a category is established – his example is homosexuality – people hasten to put themselves in it. Can the same occur with the category of Humanity? There is no reason to think not.

Aside from a few ostriches, we are aware of impending disasters in the form of climate change and ecological exhaustion. These challenges transcend national boundaries. They cry out for international and global solutions. They demand global institutions to deal with them. Either we stumble toward such structures or we shall find ourselves in a global shamble. Crises tend to concentrate the human mind. With Samuel Johnson to inspire us we need desperately to concentrate our minds *right now*. It is the required giant step we must take in our advancement of Humanity.

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Biography

Bruce Mazlish is Professor Emeritus of History at MIT. In the course of his long and distinguished career he has received a number of significant honors and held notable roles including Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an SSRC Faculty Fellowship, Visiting Member of the Institute for Advanced Study, and the Toynbee Prize, an international award in social science. Bruce Mazlish is an Emeritus Professor of History at MIT. Among his books are, *James and John Stuart Mill: Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century* (Basic Books, 1985; paperback, with new introduction, Transaction Press, 1988), and *Bruce Mazlish, The Uncertain Sciences (Yale, 1988; paperback with a new introduction, Transaction Press, 2007)*. In the latter, Mazlish undertakes to explore questions about what kind of knowledge the human sciences, including history, can claim to offer: is such knowledge “scientific” and what do we mean by “scientific” in this context?

Notes

1. William Whewell in the nineteenth century, who also coined the term “science” to encompass all the separate studies such as geology, botany, and natural history, was the philosophical proponent of the idea of consilience. ♣.[#N1-pt1]
2. See <http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/learning/pdfs/buckland.pdf> [<http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/learning/pdfs/buckland.pdf>] for further information on Buckland’s career ♣.[#N2-pt1]
3. *The Ascent of Man* was the title given by Jacob Bronowski to his extraordinary and brilliant TV series on humankind. ♣.[#N3-pt1]
4. I have written at length on this subject elsewhere. See *The Fourth Discontinuity: Co-evolution of Humans and Machines* (Yale, 1993). ♣.[#N4-pt1]
5. See Mazlish (1975) for a further discussion of this. ♣.[#N5-pt1]
6. See especially Sévane Garibian, “Géonocide arménien et conceptualisation du crime contre l’humanité. De l’intervention pour cause d’humanité à la intervention pour violation des lois de l’humanité”, *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah*, no 177-178, 2003, pp. 274-294 ♣.[#N6-pt1]
7. Martin Albrow, “Hiroshima: The First Global Event?,” Paper presented to the Workshop on “Collective Memory and Collective Knowledge in a Global Age” at the Centre for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economics and Political science, April 17/18, 2007 ♣.[#N7-pt1]
8. It is to the shame of the US that, along with Russia and China, it has not ratified its agreement with the ICC. If it had, of course, both President Bush and his Vice-President Cheney would have been subject to trial for their open advocacy and use of torture. ♣.[#N8-pt1]

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