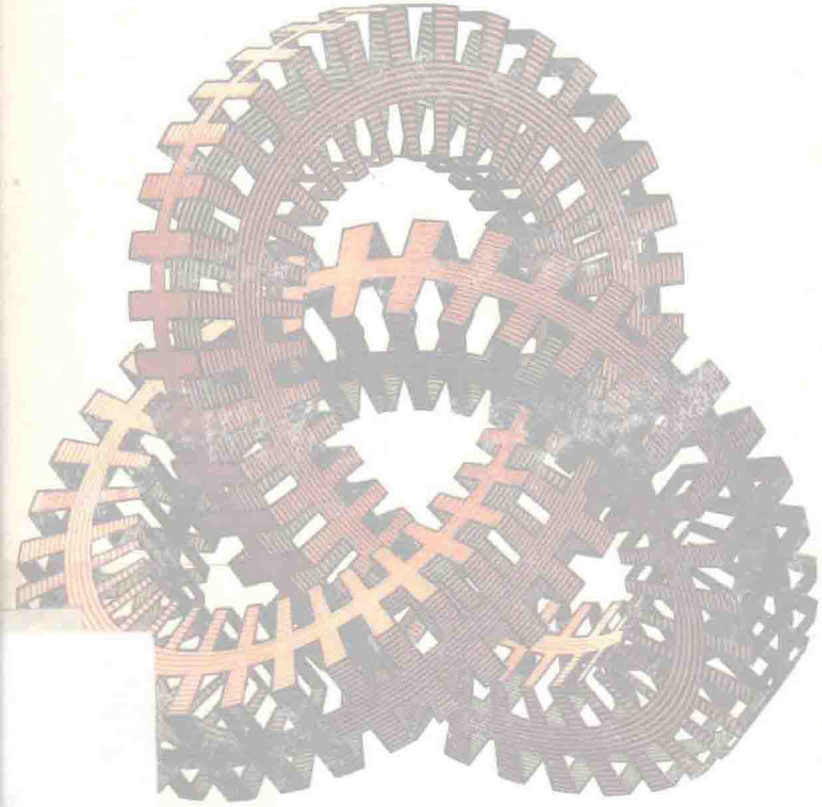
Krishan Kumar

PROPHECY AND PROGRESS

The Sociology of Industrial and Post-Industrial Society



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Prophecy and Progress

Krishan Kumar was born in Trinidad in 1942 and at the age of nine he moved to England where he was educated at William Ellis School, London, and St John's College, Cambridge, where he took a First Class degree in History in 1964. In 1965 he took a Master's degree in Sociology at the London School of Economics, followed by two years postgraduate research. Since 1967 Dr Kumar has been a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Kent and, since 1977, Senior Lecturer. He was awarded his Ph.D. in 1977. During 1972–3 he was a Producer in the Talks and Documentaries Department of the BBC. He is Research Adviser to the Acton Society Trust.

Dr Kumar has made frequent broadcasts for the BBC, and has contributed regularly to the *Listener* and several articles to academic journals such as *Sociology* and the *Sociological Review*. He also edited *Revolution: The Theory and Practice of a European Idea* (1971).

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Preface

This book, probably inevitably with a theme such as it has, has been strongly affected by recent history, both intellectual and political. To take the intellectual first. At the suggestion of my colleague Ray Pahl, who knew of my interest in theories of social change, I began some time in 1972 to explore the newly re-opened vein of speculation on the future of industrial society. I found myself, somewhat to my surprise, in an unsuspected world of scenarios, 'surprise-free' projections, Delphi forecasting, commissions on the year 2000, and institutes of futurology. An initial hope that I might be able to combine my liking for science fiction with more sober academic pursuits was, alas, soon disappointed. Even the most routine science-fiction writer has more imagination and understanding than was revealed in the technocratic, jargon-ridden, commission reports, think-tank projections, and social forecasts through which I dutifully plodded. If we were indeed facing 'future shock', the most shocking thing about the future seemed to be its prose, and its ponderousness. Innumerable 'Mankind 2000s' and 'Plan 2000s' later, it was quite clear to me that it would be unprofitable to devote a whole book to the phenomenon of futurology. It would be too dispiriting a business.

There was one exception. It was not long before I came across Daniel Bell and his theory of the 'post-industrial' society, first elegantly and powerfully stated in some notes of 1967. Here was an idea that had a good deal of plausibility, and seemed well worth further examination. It was intellectually bolder and tougher by far than anything else I had hit upon in the literature of futurology. Industrial society, he proposed, was increasingly departing from its nineteenth-century base. We needed to take

stock of its present, and think about its future, with quite different intellectual concepts from those inherited in the traditional theories of industrialism. This view therefore also had the special attraction of being quite consciously and explicitly linked to the classic sociological theories of industrialism. Indeed it depended for much of its force on the contrast with those analyses, and the history subsumed by them.

This then suggested the pattern of investigation. As an essential step in assessing its worth, the post-industrial idea directed the student of industrial society back to the historical past of that society and the theorizing that accompanied its origins and evolution. If we were moving into a 'post-industrial society', what was the 'industrial society' which it was replacing and from which it was being so sharply distinguished? What were its principles of structure and development, and how might these have changed in the course of the last two centuries? How in particular had the great European sociologists of the last century – Saint-Simon, Marx, Tocqueville, Weber, Durkheim – conceived the new society that they saw forming before their eyes? For it was evident that the post-industrial theory was constructed very much with those figures in mind, and in one aspect aspired to do for the late twentieth century what they had done for the nineteenth: that is, to create a powerful vision or 'image' of a society in the making. The possibility arose that the force of the post-industrial idea might derive as much as anything from a contrast, not so much with the real history, as with the image, of industrial society, to which the nineteenth-century sociologists had made their influential contribution. A further step in the analysis therefore involved setting the 'image of industrialism' against the historical developments of the times. In the final conception, what seemed the most helpful way of proceeding was to counterpose the image of the post-industrial society to that of the industrial society, and to see both as related in an intellectual tradition which had produced a special and at times seriously distorting vision of the history of industrial society. To get a better sight of our present condition, we had first to define and dissect that tradition.

Logically, at the beginning of this tradition, I came to the figure of Saint-Simon, the first prophet of the industrial society; and here a further theme offered itself. Saint-Simon's thought straddled the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea of progress and the nineteenth-century idea of industrialism. His sociology of industrialism explicitly linked 'progress' and 'the industrial society': the idea of progress was to find its fulfilment and end in the establishment of industrial society. Later sociologists inherited this fusion of ideas, although with varying degrees of confidence. As part of the exploration of the sociology of industrial societies, therefore, I have sought to trace the varying fortunes of the idea of progress, up to and including its embodiment in the contemporary theory of post-industrialism.

The idea of progress also provides a bridge between these themes, which occupy the main part of the book, and the ideas developed in the last two chapters. I have indicated the intellectual currents which stimulated this study. The impact of the political history of our times came just after I had started serious work on the book. In the winter of 1973–4 the actions of the oil-producing states quadrupled the price of oil, the staple of the industrial system, and the world woke up to the energy crisis. Of course there had been people – E. F. Schumacher was one of them – who had been issuing warnings about energy for some time before that. But it took the dramatic events of that winter to make energy part of the consciousness of the world, and to alert it to the dependence of the industrial system on fuels and resources which were finite, dangerously depleted, and unevenly distributed across the globe.

What followed was a remarkable and highly educative debate, in all the industrial countries, on the current condition and future prospects of the industrial societies. For months the correspondence columns of *The Times* made for fascinating daily reading. The *New York Review of Books*, with characteristic intellectual pungency, published a whole series of articles on resources and technology, amongst which the contributions of Emma Rothschild and Geoffrey Barraclough were outstanding. In all this, the energy crisis was rightly seen as symptomatic of a much

deeper crisis of industrial society. The confident progressivism of the post-1945 era was checked. The mood of anxiety and uncertainty was extended backwards to bring into question the whole mode of development of the industrial societies to date. Some proclaimed the 'end of the hydro-carbon age', some even 'the end of industrialism'. Small was rediscovered to be beautiful. Serious attention was paid to alternative forms of technology, powered by alternative, renewable sources of energy such as sun, sea, and wind. The whole structure of work and bureaucratic organization, as this had taken shape over two centuries, was declared to be in need of re-examination. To most reflective people it was evident, at the very least, that certain assumptions built into the pattern of development of industrial societies were now very shaky. Rapid and continuous economic growth was one of these. Some fundamental readjustment, some shift of direction, seemed urgent and necessary.

My thinking during these years was undoubtedly affected by the new mood, although I can honestly say that I was predisposed to go along with it in any case. The post-industrial idea was now more firmly seen in perspective as a product of an epoch of exceptional growth and abundance (although I have never thought that it can be dismissed just because of this, any more, say, than Marx's theory of capitalism can be dismissed because of the end of the epoch of *laissez-faire*). It may well in fact turn out to be the last, and by no means the least, theory of industrial society which is still basically couched in the terms of classic industrialism. At any rate, I certainly felt the need to pose the question: if not the post-industrial society *à la* Bell, what then? What alternative lines of development are conceivable, what emerging, in the last three decades of the twentieth century? The last two chapters offer some thoughts on this. They are very preliminary and tentative, and some are bound to find them unduly fanciful. But it seemed to me that some effort had to be made in this direction, in rounding off this account of the theory and practice of industrial society.

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I should like to offer my grateful thanks for help and support to Jill Norman, of Penguin Books. To Ray Pahl, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent and the general editor of Penguin Sociology, I owe a good deal more than is usually owed to series editors. He was not only responsible for suggesting the initial idea for this book but, as a colleague and friend, has over the years been very generous with both his time and his thoughts, in discussing its themes. This book can only have profited from those conversations with him. Thanks are also due, I suspect, to the members of the Acton Society, London, especially (probably) Edward Goodman and Trevor Smith; although what ideas have actually been stolen from the Society's very convivial seminars and dinners could only be determined by someone with a stronger head than mine. Finally I should like to thank John Goy, of the University of Kent library staff, for preparing the index.

KRISHAN KUMAR
Canterbury, February 1977

1 New Worlds

The History of the Human Species as a whole may be regarded as the unravelling of a hidden Plan of Nature for accomplishing a perfect state of Civil Constitution for Society . . . as the sole State of Society in which the tendency of human nature can be all and fully developed.

Immanuel Kant, *Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmopolitan Plan* (1784).

Poetic imagination has put the Golden Age in the cradle of the human race, amid the ignorance and brutishness of primitive times; it is rather the Iron Age which should be put there. The Golden Age of the human race is not behind us but before us; it lies in the perfection of the social order. Our ancestors never saw it; our children will one day arrive there; it is for us to clear the way.

Henri de Saint-Simon, *The Reorganization of the European Community* (1814).

1. The Ideologues of Progress

When sociology arrived in Europe early in the nineteenth century, it marked the culmination of a strand of thinking about man and society that was increasingly directed towards the future. Strictly speaking, western social thought had felt the pull of the future ever since, in the fifth century, St Augustine produced his grand work of synthesis, *The City of God.* In this Christian apologia he fused the Greek and Hebraic traditions into a philosophy of history, a theory of development, that looked forward to the end of secular history, and a movement from life in the earthly to life in the heavenly city. Such eschatological preoccupations continued to affect thought and action throughout the subsequent

centuries. But the backward-looking spell of the memory of the world of classical antiquity remained, to bewitch thinkers into a sense that the great, golden age of man was really in the past, by comparison with which present times were mean and second-hand. This spell was decisively broken only towards the end of the seventeenth century. It came in the victory of the 'Moderns' over the 'Ancients', following a long-drawn-out literary controversy, and the conviction thereafter that modern philosophy and modern science were not only the equal of that of the ancient world, but immeasurably more pregnant with great and far-reaching developments for mankind.

With this victory, as J. B. Bury was the first to point out a long while ago,[1] the idea of progress became firmly established in the European mind. Mankind could now be seen as advancing, slowly perhaps but inevitably and indefinitely, in a desirable direction. In a sense it was illogical to try to determine the happy end-point of this progression; but the attraction to do so proved irresistible. However dimly perceived, the future was seen in terms of the triumph of some existing quality or principle deemed to be of supreme worth, or as constitutive of man's or society's very nature. It might be reason, science, or liberty. But whatever it was, the principle whose fulfilment was predicted and sometimes promoted cast its light back on to the present and the past. The end, the future, became the vantage point, from which to view the present and past states of mankind; since it was only at the end of man's development that the principle would be seen in its clearest and fullest expression. No doubt, contrariwise, discerning that future would depend on the most fundamental analysis of present trends. But, just as in human biology our interest and the focus of our investigations is on the developed organism and not intrinsically, for themselves, on the materials and processes that produce it, so in social biology, or sociology, the thing that has to be kept in mind, the informing principle of our inquiry, must be the social forms that were in the making, and whose future outlines could only roughly be seen. The chronological line – past, present, and future – was barren as well as deceptive. Only the perspective of the future revealed what was

important in the past, and linked it to our lives in the present. The future was the guiding thread. Pascal said it, in the *Pensées*, in a spirit of irony; but what he said would have been taken as a solemn statement of intent by the ideologues of progress: 'The present is never an end, the past and the present are our means. Only the future is our end. Thus we never live; but we hope to live . . .'

The eighteenth century produced numerous, more extended and developed, statements of this sort. Two were especially important to the versions offered by the later sociological tradition: those of Turgot and Condorcet. To these thinkers were later linked two others, also French, and key figures in the establishment of the 'new science' of society: Henri, Comte de Saint-Simon, who was the first to analyse systematically the new industrial society that was emerging, and to suggest a plan for its organization; and Auguste Comte, who gave the new science its name, 'sociology', and laid down an elaborate programme for it to follow which has had a profound influence both in Europe and America. These four – 'the prophets of Paris', their biographer Frank Manuel has called them[2] – were linked by more than the ordinary bonds of intellectual influence. They were disciples and friends, strong bonds even when the friendships turned to bitter enmity. Condorcet was the self-confessed disciple and devoted admirer of Turgot, and in many respects his own work was a fulfilment and a development of the unpublished sketches of the latter. Saint-Simon's work reveals a close reading of Condorcet's writings, down to the existence of a manuscript in which Condorcet's *Progress of the Human Mind* was analysed under explicit headings – 'ideas to be adopted', 'ideas to be rejected'. Comte was for some years Saint-Simon's secretary and his acknowledged pupil, though he later broke sharply with his former master; he, too, wrote of Condorcet as '*mon prédecesseur immédiat*'.

There was therefore an exceptionally strong line linking the eighteenth-century *philosophes* of progress and the nineteenth-century fathers of sociology. And what gave the group its distinctiveness was its fascination with movement and change, its profound impression that human life had experienced a vast and

varied succession of different modes of thinking and behaving in the course of history. That succession was of course continuing – such was the discoverable law of social development – and these men felt themselves witnesses to yet another momentous mutation, one which was lifting human life to a newer and higher plane, and whose basic principle and promise could be discerned by all unprejudiced thinkers. Such men could not but be struck by the conviction that the contemporary equals the merely temporary. The tribulations of their private and public lives – amounting, in Condorcet's case, to his condemnation to death by the Jacobins – could be borne on the missionary belief that these were but the travails of the new order. As Manuel says,

> they were intoxicated with the future: they looked into what was about to be and they found it good. The past was a mere prologue and the present a spiritual and moral, even a physical, burden which at times was well nigh unendurable. They would destroy the present as fast as possible in order to usher in the longed-for future, to hasten the end.[3]

In the movement of thought towards the future, Turgot played a particularly significant part. His lectures on the successive advances of the human mind, delivered at the Sorbonne in 1750, constitute by general agreement the first important statement in modern times of the ideology of progress. Progress for him was not simply a fact, written into the past records of mankind; it was the very principle of the human as opposed to the natural order, and it was for this reason that the future promised a happier and more perfect state. The bare statement of this view, repeated a hundred times in the century following,[4] conceals the really radical, and necessary, departure accomplished by Turgot. For what Turgot was doing was to reassert the autonomy of the human world, as against the very influential contemporary efforts to assimilate the human to the natural order. The triumphant success of Newtonian physics dazzled the eighteenth-century philosophers. They hoped to discover in human society a principle of order, of equilibrium, equivalent to the operations of gravity in Newton's mechanical universe. Montesquieu's great masterpiece of the mid-century Enlightenment, *The Spirit of the*