ABSTRACT. Marx, like many of his contemporaries, uncritically assumed that humanity develops from primitive beginnings to ever more perfect stages. In his theory of human development he measured progress by two main standards: the decrease of all forms of dependence, and the increase of universality in man's relations to nature and to his fellow man. In our century, not only have new structures of power and dependence emerged, but successive movements have also been generated to restore the more ordered and limited relationships of the past. If belief in progress is nowadays no longer self-evident, such a state of affairs can help us reflect on the conditions necessary to realize the values which determined Marx's categorical imperative, or his insistence that we overthrow all relations by which man is made a debased and enslaved being. One of these conditions is the voluntary limitation of our needs: the need to use material goods without regard for others, the need to build up or maintain security even at the cost of violence, and the need to restrict the circle of those with whom we identify to our own particular culture, race, class or ways of thinking and acting.

In this essay I will first attempt to analyze the idea of human progress as it appears in the works of Karl Marx. In doing so, I will begin with his early writings in order that they might provide the background against which the Grundrisse and Capital can be put into perspective (Part I). Then I will sketch some developments in society which, among other things, have contributed in the more than one hundred years since the publication of the first volume of Capital (1867) to break down the 'belief in progress' which Marx held to be so self-evident (Part II). Finally, I will consider the basic values which underlay Marx's thought on progress, so as to draw some conclusions from his 'categorical imperative' (Part III).

I

Approximately from the middle of the 18th century onwards, Europeans were convinced for the most part of their superiority over all the other contemporary and past forms of the human race's self-expression and achievement. Moreover, with the emergence of the natural sciences, Europeans began to view nature in an ever more widespread way as a process of development which had its own laws. This opinion led to the dominating role
which 'belief in progress', as I would like to call this phenomenon, occupied in the minds of Europe’s intellectuals. I understand the expression ‘belief in progress’ as designating a conviction according to which humanity develops from primitive beginnings to ever more perfect stages. This idea, as a matter of fact, entails three distinctive elements: (1) There is one world history (and not many independent histories); (2) The movement of history is ordered (and not random); (3) The direction of this movement is ascending (and not stationary, cyclic, or descending). I designate this conviction a ‘belief’, insofar as it was uncritically accepted and, precisely as such, could serve as the underpinning of a critical form of thought. Whenever one accepts this idea, the result almost automatically arrived at is that one must either view the present state of human society as the best possible one, an act which is not always entirely easy, or criticize it.

To the extent that this ‘belief’ spread, attempts were made to conceive history in a new light and to present it systematically as a forward-moving development of mankind. I do not need at this point to dwell on the progressive stages through which these attempts moved.¹ Karl Marx was totally enthralled with this ‘belief’. It is also quite certain that he knew of two attempts to construe the idea of history in the light of this ‘belief’, namely those of Saint-Simon and Hegel.

In what follows, I will try briefly to outline the concept of history which can be found at various places in the works of Marx. He has in fact left behind no thoroughly worked out view concerning history. His entire theoretical effort served above all to prove that the inner law directing the ‘modern bourgeois mode of production’ was meant to give birth to a ‘new, higher’ mode of production and a corresponding form of society.

Already in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 Marx notes: “We see how the history of industry and the established objective existence of industry are the open book of man’s essential powers, the perceptibly existing human psychology.”² In this way, history itself becomes a division of the history of nature, and natural science becomes a science of man; and in the end there will be only one science.³ History, even the entirety of what is called world history, “is nothing but the creation of man through human labor, nothing but the emergence of nature for man”.⁴ What is hinted at only in a programmatic way in these manuscripts is further thought out in The German Ideology, a work which Marx and Engels co-authored in 1845.