We live in dark, disturbing times: we are witnesses to proliferating wars, perpetual genocide, predatory global capitalism, rampant militarism, unparalleled government surveillance and repression, and a phony “war on terrorism” that fronts for attacks on dissent and liberties. We are facing the ever-present threat of financial collapse and global depression, climate change, the sixth great extinction crisis in the earth’s history, and systemic planetary meltdown. Scientists warn that we are at a tipping point of global ecological collapse, and report the shocking speed of catastrophic changes such as those that turn icecaps into water and forests into savannas.

Welcome to the fruits of “progress.” The modernist ideology par excellence, progress is defined as the expansion of the human empire over animals and nature; as bringing other species and the natural world under human command; and as overcoming the “primitive,” “savage,” and “barbaric” stages of premodern human existence for full-blown techno-scientific, mechanistic, and market-dominated societies. The inherent fallacies and disastrous consequences of the long lineage of dominator cultures that peaked in modern European societies led to a volatile contradiction between the social and natural worlds. The question is not if this contradiction between fast-growing
market societies and slow-changing, sustainable-oriented ecological systems will be resolved—it will be one way or the other. The question, rather, is: will humans consciously and voluntarily change and adapt to nature, or will nature drastically reduce human numbers and their impact, through prolonged and painful means such as war, famine, and disease?

This is a difficult moment to argue for the notion of progress. Indeed, who thinks that tomorrow will be better than today? That their children will inherit a brighter future and jobs, wages, and retirement plans will be secure? Are we confident that homes, health care, and education will be affordable? Can we be certain that the plight of the poor and the needy will be overcome by waging war on poverty rather than on people? That the ecosystems which sustain life will convalesce, and not collapse? Did not the dream of the Enlightenment—which foretold that the spread of reason, science, technology and “free markets” would bring autonomy, peace and prosperity to all—die on the slaughter bench of the twentieth century? In reality, multiple conflicts including two world wars, fascism, totalitarianism, genocide, the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the threat of nuclear annihilation, growing corporate hegemony, and accelerating environmental breakdown led the dance of death during that entire macabre period. Barely out of the starting gates, the twenty-first century opened with attacks on the World Trade Center; the deployment of an endless “war on terror” masking a permanent war on democracy; and the unparalleled rise of surveillance and security states. It has already recorded resource scarcity crises; escalating wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa; and increasingly aggressive neoliberalism and capitalist globalization. It has witnessed ever-widening gaps between the world’s rich and poor, global market crashes, hastening species extinction, and catastrophic climate change.

Toward the end of the 1960s, a new wave of counter-enlightenment thinkers, or postmodernists, rose to prominence with denunciations of civilization, modernity, and the notion of progress. They were influenced by Max Weber’s critique of the “iron cage of bureaucracy,” Martin Heidegger’s analysis of technological domination, and