

Progress: its visionaries and its malcontents

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Abstract

The introduction to this special issue on *Progress: its visionaries and its malcontents* sketches the background to contemporary debates about the concept of progress. It focuses particularly on the notion of political progress, or, in other words, a belief in the possibility of deliberate, concerted, collective action to change the world for the better. It traces how the notion of progress received a significant boost at the time of the European Enlightenment and then goes on to discuss some of the key fault-lines in this thinking, most notably as it relates to imperialism and colonialism. In the face of a number of other recent critiques of progress, the importance of certain key historical periods, when progress was viewed in a more positive light and deemed to be a real, achievable goal, provides the rationale for the selection of texts chosen for this issue.

Keywords

Progress; Enlightenment; modernity; imperialism; the long Sixties; decolonization.

There has been much debate in recent years around the question of progress. While some have brought into question the significance of the concept with reference to the evolution of the human species in terms of its biological, physical and intellectual capacities in relation to the natural world of plants and animals, others have concentrated on its particular relevance to the understanding of human history. In the latter case some have focused on progress as an outcome of scientific developments and the extension of human reason that has enabled a greater understanding and mastery of the natural conditions in which humans operate, whereas others have looked more closely within human beings themselves, viewing progress primarily in terms of the development of morality and human perfectibility, sometimes even encompassing a religious or spiritual agenda.

Undoubtedly, all of these different perspectives raise difficult and interesting questions. The focus of the pieces in this special issue, however, lies elsewhere. It is primarily concerned with the notion of political progress - how to take deliberate concerted action to change the world for the better, to sum it up in the most general terms.

It cannot be claimed that the notion of progress did not exist in ancient times and in a variety of different societies and thought systems since then, before the modern period. There have been very many variants on Utopian visions and ideals, often associated with religious movements and a belief in establishing a city of heaven on earth, such as the Levellers and Diggers during the period of the English Civil War, or the visionary radicalism of a William Blake (1757-1827), to quote just a few examples. Even Leibniz, who was the butt of Voltaire's satire in *Candide* (Voltaire (1759) 1966) for his belief that this world "was the best of all possible worlds", did not rule out the idea of progress; indeed, it was intrinsic in his philosophy that the god-created universe was progressing towards perfection (Leibniz 1697). However, the notion of progress most certainly received a terrific boost at the time of the development and spread of capitalism, when it became divorced from the religious and the

sacred and underwent what Nesbit has called a process of “secularization” (Nesbit 1994, 172-173). These economic and social developments were inextricably bound up with the emergence of the ideas of the European Enlightenment which advocated the overturning of the old order founded on autocratic monarchical systems and religious dogma, in favour of a new political modernity, in which the values of freedom, justice, equality and individualism came to the fore. Clearly, this type of modernity took different forms and contained its own contradictions and tensions, depending on the circumstances in which it was developed and put into practice. Fundamentally, however, it was based on the belief that society was going forward and could be improved, even if there were always those who stepped forward to challenge the extent to which these improvements were possible or desirable.

The label of modernity encompassed a vast range of philosophical and political perspectives: from the rationalists, humanists and positivists with their faith in human reason to develop science and master the natural world, to those who extended this faith not only to a conviction in the equal distribution of this human rationality to each member of the species, but also to a belief in the intrinsic equality of each individual’s worth, at least with regard to the political and juridical systems. Then, going beyond the principle of equality before the law and democratic ideas of the sovereignty of the people, howsoever defined, the camp of the progressives would increasingly incorporate those who challenged these abstract notions of citizenship, with demands and theories for solutions to the economic and social inequalities that were the inevitable consequences of the development of capitalism. Thus, along with the realisation of economic development and increased productivity, technological progress, the bourgeois ideals of democracy and rationality, progress increasingly came to signify the replacement of the bourgeois economic and social order, based on the exploitation of the labouring classes by the capitalists, with a better system, in which the economy and society would be organized in such a way as would ultimately benefit all equally. Again, the divergences and variants were many between those who believed that there were natural laws of economic and social development that made socialism or communism an inevitable and necessary historical outcome, through those who thought the transition would come about through the bourgeois democratic, and usually parliamentary, process or syndicalist organisation, to those who believed change would only come about through violent revolutionary action. It is not the place here to detail all the different strands which have embraced the strategic goals of socialism or communism, whether they were based on social democratic thinking, political theories derived from Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, Maoism, Anarchism, or some other body of thought. In spite of all the differences, one idea which united them all was the belief in the notion of progress.

Over the past few decades, this notion of progress has come under sustained attack. The critiques have taken many different forms. On the one hand, the ideas of the European Enlightenment have been increasingly challenged, no longer solely from the conservative opponents of democracy and the defenders of autocratic reaction, but also from those who identified the fault lines in the European project of modernity, based on the assumptions of racial and civilizational superiority, often used to rationalize the domination and colonial exploitation of other non-European peoples (Sala-Molins 2005). In the “West”, progress had been largely defined in material terms, on the one hand, implying economic growth through industrialization. However, this mainly quantitative definition had also been accompanied by a qualitative dimension, in which progress was linked to the development of human beings and human society into superior forms, either in terms of the onward march of civilization or the evolution of higher types of human beings, with more humane values or indeed

superhuman values, which would signify the transcendence of the older type of human and the emergence of a higher human being.

This was not the case when it was applied to the colonized and subjugated peoples. Some, such as Arthur de Gobineau and the eugenicists, argued that colonized peoples of colour were pre-destined by their race to remain inferior. Others envisaged colonized peoples eventually transcending what was seen as their “subhuman” status to achieve access to the club of the civilized nations thanks to the efforts of those engaged in the “mission civilisatrice” or the “white man’s burden”. However, this could only be achieved by a process of acculturation, involving the rejection of their own culture and the adoption of the values of the colonial power and was in any case a progress that was almost inevitably deferred to a later date.

Such challenges have formed part and parcel of the ideas inspiring anticolonial movements. Although there is no clear evidence to support Gandhi’s often-quoted response when asked what he thought of Western civilization – “I think it would be a good idea” – it would clearly not be in contradiction with his generally critical approach to the role of the British in India, though perhaps at odds with his critique of modernity (Gandhi (1909) 2013). Indeed, Gandhi’s thought went much further than noting the gulf between the values and ideas put forward and their non-application in practice, to a fundamental rejection of much that went by the name of modernity and progress. Others involved in the anticolonial struggles actively embraced the notion of progress. Nehru, for instance, was particularly focused on the need for progress on the socio-economic and cultural front, to raise “the people in question to higher levels and hence the general advancement of humanity” (Nehru 1938, 1).

Other critiques are based not so much on a denial of the possibility and desirability of progress as on the limitations of its applicability and its use within the framework of an ideology that reinforces European and now, more generally, Western domination. In this context, we cannot ignore the radical critique developed by Frantz Fanon, who, in theorising the Algerian Revolution and wider national liberation movement, stressed the need for a complete break with Europe, its ideas and values, as these could offer nothing which would be of use to the colonized waging their anticolonial struggles. This did not mean a return to the past. It was not a question of reviving a glorious past that had been crushed by colonial conquest. His vision of the revolution was not a retreat into an African particularism, but a pathway for the colonized to become part of universal history. It was not a rejection of progress but a radically new interpretation of it, a pioneering new way forward (Maspero 1970, 8). Fundamental to this originality was the notion of the New Man. Where colonialism had made the colonized into pure body, animal or thing, anticolonial violence would not only give them back their humanity, but make them go further – towards the creation of a New Man. This was more than a humanisation process, it was not just to put them on a par with the European colonizer and achieve recognition of their humanity on an equal footing. It was part of a wider process of universal liberation that transcended the particular boundaries of Algerian nationalism. It also entailed transcending humanity as currently defined, to move to the level of a higher type of being. Fanon thus ended his *Wretched of the Earth* with a call for the realisation of this New Man; this would not come from Europe, which forever spoke of humanism while massacring mankind in all corners of the world (Fanon (1961) 2002, 301). For him, it was not a question of imitating Europe, but of seeking to invent “l’homme total”, the total man, which Europe had been incapable of bringing to fruition (Fanon (1961) 2002, 302). In other words, it was for the colonized to take up the revolutionary process and carry it further forward, given that Europe itself was now incapable of making progress in the development of humanity. Clearly, for Fanon, Europe had reached a state of stagnation,

where movement has been immobilized and the dialectic replaced by thinking which rationalizes the status quo. The question thus arises: has the same sort of stasis now affected the decolonized in the same way as Fanon had claimed it had affected Europeans? Has the logic of equilibrium, of maintaining stability at all costs become the dominant one for the postcolonial states?

Along with the critique of flawed European Enlightenment thinking, there has been a growth in theoretical critiques of the notion of progress itself. Faith in progress as an unstoppable historical certainty has been shattered by real historical developments such as the growth of fascism and Nazism, the two world wars and the barbarity associated with them. There has been a recognition that history can go backwards as well as forwards, that there can be regressive as well as progressive phases. Even those who believed in the generally progressive march of history, such as Karl Marx, had been forced to concede that there could be losers as well as winners in the actual processes involved in economic and social change. Writing of the role of British imperialism in India in the nineteenth century, for instance, Marx described the efforts of the British to create the “material premises” for economic and social progress in India, whilst causing immeasurable misery to millions.

Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation? (Marx and Engels (1959)/1975, 33).

In 1834, in a quote widely attributed to a confidential report, even the governor-general, William Bentinck, had described the impact of the import of cheap mill-made goods from Britain to wreak devastation on the once-mighty Indian textile industry in stark terms thus: “The misery hardly finds parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India.” It is not hard to find modern-day parallels in the consequences arising from the progress of globalization.

More general theoretical challenges to the validity of the modernist “narrative” have arisen in the developments associated with postmodernity, leading to a questioning of the very idea of progress, certainly in a unilineal sense, and a growing stress on the relativity of values. Even within the broader Marxist theoretical family, the belief in the possibility of historical change brought about by human agency has been challenged by theorists inspired by the premises of structuralism, such as Louis Althusser, who dismissed the previous widely held Marxist notion of dialectical change as pure Hegelianism and denied any role for the human subject except as the support of ideology (Althusser 1965; Althusser 1970). Previous critiques of socialism and communism, based sometimes on theoretical analyses, but more often on the documentation and interpretation of the shortfalls of their implementation in real historical practice, have now been superseded by attempts to undermine theoretically the whole notion and possibility of progress. The British philosopher, John Gray, is a striking example of this tendency, with his *Straw Dogs: Thought on Humans and Other Animals* (Gray 2002) or *The Silence of the Animals. On Progress and other Modern Myths* (Gray 2013) in which he adopts a negative, and some have said, nihilistic approach to the whole idea of human progress. Others, such as Ronald Wright, have linked their critique of progress to a world outlook more closely linked with the development of ecology, as in his *Short History of Progress* (Wright 2004).

On the one hand, with the collapse of Soviet-style communism, the whole ideology upon which it was supposedly based has been deemed a total failure by many for its inability to

deliver the progress to a better society it promised. On the other hand, even where the notion of progress is maintained, its scope has been dramatically narrowed. In the name of “realism”, progress is now often defined solely in terms of quantifiable economic growth, linked to the global extension of a particular economic system, capitalism, and even, by some who see this as “the best of all possible worlds”, to the “end of History” with the ending of ideological conflict in favour of a universal consensus (Fukuyama 1992). Moreover, important challenges to the validity and sustainability of the notion of progress through economic development and indefinitely improving living standards have arisen with the growth of ecological thought and movements worldwide.

This is the background to the international, interdisciplinary conference on “Progress, Change and Development”, which was held at the University of Portsmouth on 4- 6 June 2015, organized by Margaret Majumdar and Joanna Warson, from which the articles in this issue have been drawn. The conference aimed to bring some of the generation who were involved in attempts to bring about change in the 1960s and 1970s – a period when progress as a result of concerted political activity seemed entirely possible – together with researchers, theorists, practitioners, activists from the younger generations today. This encounter produced a vital and sometimes unexpected dynamic. The papers examined how progress and development were conceptualized, practised and imagined during the periods of national liberation struggles, of decolonization and its aftermath, of political and social upheaval and change. It also analysed successes and failures at all levels and explored new ways of thinking that are being developed at the present time, particularly those that break with hackneyed notions.

By bringing the different generations into contact and interaction with each other, it succeeded in creating a forum to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and understanding of the earlier period, on the one hand, and the expression and elaboration of new ideas of progress and development and how they might be achieved, on the other. There were fruitful and positive debates, looking at specific struggles across the globe, as well as the international links connecting these movements. The themes covered included the following: national liberation and nation-building; globalization and anti-capitalism; transnational movements; economic and social development; theoretical and other considerations; race; gender; education; young people; progress in the cultural field.

There is indeed considerable diversity in the pieces selected for this special issue, reflecting the content of the conference. However, there are common concerns and questions underpinning the various approaches to the topic of progress, change and development. One such focus is how notions of progress translate into meaningful collective political activity at key moments of history, such as the end of World War II, the start of the decolonization process and 1968, against the background of on-going theoretical debates that bring into question the notion of progress itself. These key historical moments share as a common feature the mass mobilization of large groups of people who have come together in a joint enterprise to bring about change. Sometimes they are linked by nationalist ideology, sometimes by class consciousness, or both at the same time. Other types of ideology, including religious beliefs, can also of course bring people together. However, our concerns here focus on those movements which have actively sought to change the world for the better, to bring about progress here and now for those who have suffered from exploitation and oppression. It is at times like these that the people can become an active collective subject, united in their struggle – “un peuple debout”, a people ready and mobilized for action, as Anne Mathieu has described the mass of the Spanish pro-republicans resisting against the Francoist rebellion (Mathieu 2016). A similar notion could be borrowed from Sartre who saw

the possibility, at particular moments in history, for individual members of a group to fuse and transcend their condition through group praxis, becoming a collective subject, not determined by Others but working together with Others as one (*Critique de la Raison dialectique* (1960) 1985). While Sartre has envisaged this in its broadest interpretation as the historical role of the universal proletariat, which could throw off its shackles to become the subject of history and bring about change, his theory also extends to other groups who have been constituted by social processes as a passive object, or *en-soi*, which nonetheless have the capacity to become a collective subject, empowered to bring about their own freedom in a collective version of the *pour-soi*.

As we have seen, a key issue in the debate around the question of progress has concerned the origins of the notion in the European Enlightenment and the relevance of notions of political, economic and social modernity, deriving from European ideas, to the non-European peoples, who have been on the receiving end of the exploitative practices of colonial domination and cultural imperialism.

The reaction against colonial exploitation developed rapidly after the First World War. Colonial territories that were no longer ruled by their previous sovereign were transferred under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles to other colonial powers which were considered better placed to develop them for the benefit of the populations living within those territories. The League of Nations mandates under which this transfer of responsibility took place represented a first formal international recognition that colonial powers had a responsibility to promote the economic, social and political wellbeing of colonized populations. This idea was taken up and promoted by European anti-imperialists during the inter-war period. However, it was only after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and the signing of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 guaranteeing the right of all peoples to self-determination that the colonized began an unstoppable challenge to the right of the colonial powers to define their future and the nature of progress on their behalf. After the end of the war they increasingly demanded to exercise this right for themselves. The independence of India in 1947 marked the beginning of the rapid unravelling of the European colonial empires; the Bandung conference of 1955 gave renewed impetus to the process and by the mid-1960s the vast majority of the colonies had become politically independent.

Political independence did not mark the end of imperialism however. Decolonization does not refer only to the political transfer of power, but also to the ending of economic and cultural dependency and the "decolonizing of the mind" from the colonizer's ideas that made the colonized appear inferior. This is a process that remains far from complete: externally imposed development plans, driven by neo-liberal economics and supported by Western aid donors, are regarded by some as a new form of colonialism – neo-colonialism – that continues to limit the sovereignty of developing nations and their ability to define their own futures. In this special issue, this theme is taken up by Samir Amin, who draws on his long experience of involvement with anti-imperialist movements and theoretical work on economics to place contemporary issues of development and state-building within a historical perspective. Looking back to the Bandung Conference of 1955, he advocates the creation of sovereign projects at the national level and a renewal of solidarities between the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean to promote an alternative vision of the future.

Two articles reflect on theoretical questions. The article by Luis Martinez Andrade is a theoretical analysis of liberation theology in the context of Latin American political movements, focusing on the problematical issue of modernity within this thinking. Francesco

Caddeo deals with issues of identity, seen as a barrier to social progress in the present socio-political context, and raises a number of interesting theoretical questions.

Several of the contributions concentrate on events around 1968 and their aftermath. One area that is often ignored in discussions of these events is Northern Ireland. Chris Reynolds analyses the impact of international events on political developments in Northern Ireland at this time and throws fresh light on the “troubles” from a novel perspective. The subject of Manus McGrogan’s paper is the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, its specific dimension and relationship to anticolonial struggles in Africa. He also discusses the long-term impact of these events. Sharif Gemie deals with the same period, which one might call the “long Sixties”, seeing it as a significant turning-point in cultural attitudes in the immediate postcolonial period, when the balance of power between Europe and the rest of the world was being redefined. He looks at the international phenomenon that was the Hippy Trail across Asia in the 1960s and 1970s. His article specifically brings new light to bear on the relationships between the participants and the local populations and the significance which was given to these. With Helen Lackner’s analysis of political developments in Yemen, we find a pertinent link between this period and the present day. She draws extensively on her own experience to present and analyse political and social change in the little studied Republic of Yemen.

Finally, with Brian Sudlow’s contribution, we move on to a later, less optimistic period in French history, when a report was commissioned by the French government in 1985 with the brief to identify and map out those elements which could be favourable to French progress in the future. Taking as his starting point what was by then widely perceived as the myth of progress, he presents an interesting analysis of this report, opening up the whole notion for further debate.

What is at stake here is the question of political progress: is it possible or just a utopian illusion? How can it be defined? How does the belief and desire for progress translate into collective political action? Why does it seem more possible at certain moments in history, high points or revolutionary situations? What is the theoretical basis for a belief in progress? Can it be separated from its theoretical origins, e.g. in the European Enlightenment, to assume a form that is more in keeping with current conditions and concerns? Why did the possibility of progress become a reality in the aftermath of World War II, with the “Spirit of 45”, to quote the film-maker Ken Loach, or again at the time of decolonization, or during the widespread movements of protest occurring at the end of the 1960s in many European and North American countries? Have more recent movements, such as those that have been collectively grouped under the umbrella of the “Arab Spring”, revived the notion of progress or have these developments given further ammunition to the progress deniers?

These are some of the questions that we hope may arise out of these articles. Undoubtedly, the answers will depend on further concrete analysis of specific economic, political and social factors, as well as a reformulation of an appropriate theoretical framework for political interventions in the 21st Century.

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