

From Domination to Autonomy: Two Eras of Progress in World-sociological Perspective*

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Od panství k autonomii: Dvě období pokroku z hlediska světové sociologie

Abstract: In recent decades, the belief in progress that was widespread across the two centuries following the French Revolution has withered away. This article suggests, though, that the diagnosis of the end of progress can be used as an occasion to rethink what progress meant and what it might mean today. The proposal for rethinking proceeds in two big steps. First, the meaning of progress that was inherited from the Enlightenment is reconstructed and contrasted with the way progress actually occurred in history. In this step, it is demonstrated that progress was expected through human autonomy, but that it was actually brought about by domination and resistance to domination. A look at the short revival of progress after the middle of the twentieth century will confirm this insight and direct the attention to the transformation of the world over the past half century, on which the second step focuses. This socio-political transformation is analyzed as spelling (almost) the end of formal domination. The current era has often been characterized by the tendencies towards globalization and individualization as well as, normatively, by the increasingly hegemonic commitment to human rights and democracy. A critical analysis of the current socio-political constellation, however, shows that the end of formal domination does not mean the end of history; it rather requires the elaboration of a new understanding of possible progress. Progress can no longer predominantly be achieved through resistance to domination, but rather through autonomous collective action and through the critical interpretation of the world one finds oneself in.

Keywords: modernity; progress; autonomy; domination; resistance

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Between 1979 and 1989 the world changed. 1979 is the year of the second oil-price hike, of the Iranian Revolution, of the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and of the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *Condition postmoderne*. 1989 is the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, during which political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history" and philosopher Richard Rorty put his suggestion that social and political thought may already have had "the last conceptual revolution it needs" between book covers. Lyotard claimed that societies are not as intelligible as social

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and political thought had assumed and were far from having embarked on a historical trajectory of linear evolution. Iran, in turn, had long been seen as being on a stable course of “modernization and development”, but the overthrow of the Shah regime demonstrated that other avenues are possible. Ten years later, the beginning of the end of Soviet-style socialism, in contrast, seemed to confirm the view that “there is no alternative”, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, to market capitalism and liberal democracy. In their characteristically different ways, Fukuyama and Rorty assessed and welcomed this new situation in society and politics as well as in intellectual life.

Despite their all-too-evident flaws, Lyotard’s, Fukuyama’s and Rorty’s ideas captured an important aspect of their time. We may call this aspect: the end of progress. On the face of it, Lyotard suggested that progress was not – or: no longer – possible, whereas Fukuyama and Rorty claimed that all significant progress had already been achieved. The upshot, though, is the same: if the diagnosis is correct, progress is no longer possible in our time. Even the relentless theoretical optimist, Jürgen Habermas, declared his adherence to the spirit of the time by calling the end of Soviet socialism a “catching-up revolution” [*Habermas 1990*]. Like the hare in the tale, “progressive” political activists around the world found themselves at the end of their race in the face of the liberal-democrat hedgehog who smilingly says “I am already here”.

But now it seems that, like the hedgehog couple, liberal-democratic philosophy of history has played a mirror trick on humankind. Upon arrival, the final destination of the journey did not at all correspond with the image that had been used for publicity. From the 1990s onwards, unbound capitalism has led to increase of inequality, worsening of working conditions, and the dismantling of the welfare state there where it existed. There are now large areas on the planet where lawfulness no longer exists, and violence is ever more widespread. Furthermore, the ecology of the planet is ever more imbalanced, moving us rapidly closer to the moment at which living conditions will dramatically deteriorate due to climate change. All we can expect, therefore, seems to be a continuation of wars and violence, poverty and inequality, exploitation and oppression, interrupted only, at best, by spatially and temporally limited periods in which relative peace, well-being, equality and freedom can be obtained. The optimism of those who thought that the promise of progress has already been fulfilled has yielded to the pessimism of those who thought that lasting progress is unachievable. The only possible meaning of progress in our time, as Claus Offe [2010] recently suggested, is the avoidance of regress.

The following reasoning starts out from the assumption that we cannot just accept the end of progress. Instead we should use this diagnosis as an occasion to rethink what progress meant and what it might mean today. The proposal for rethinking will proceed in two big steps. First, we will try to reconstruct the meaning of progress that we inherited from the Enlightenment and contrast it with the way progress actually occurred in history. In this step, we will try to demonstrate that progress was expected through human autonomy, but that it was actually brought about by domination and resistance to domination. A look at the short revival of progress after the middle of the twentieth century will confirm this insight and direct our attention to the transformation of the world over the past half century, on which the second step will focus. This socio-political transformation, which I referred to earlier as the destructuring of organized modernity [*Wagner 1994*], will be analyzed as spelling (almost) the end of formal domination. The era after

organized modernity has often been characterized by the tendencies towards globalization and individualization as well as, normatively, by the increasingly hegemonic commitment to human rights and democracy. This is reflected in the view, cited above, that all possible progress has already been achieved. A critical analysis of the current socio-political constellation shows that the end of formal domination does not mean the end of history, but it does require the elaboration of a new understanding of possible progress. Progress can no longer predominantly be achieved through resistance to domination, but rather through autonomous collective action and through the critical interpretation of the world one finds oneself in.

From autonomy to domination: a short history of progress

The strong idea of progress

In the most general sense, progress means improvement in the living conditions of human beings, not least in their ways of living together. Progress is always temporal; it refers to improvement through a comparison over time. In this general sense, human beings have always been concerned with progress, to the best of our knowledge. They have seen it happening and have reflected on the reasons for it, not least on the conditions for bringing it about. They have also witnessed decline and have reflected on possibilities of avoiding it. Observing their past, they have sometimes made distinctions between improvements in some respects and decline in others. Mostly, they did not expect improvements to be lasting accomplishments. Everything that could improve could also deteriorate again, and was likely to do so at some point.

However, something very particular occurred in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The expectation arose that comprehensive improvement was possible, improvement in all respects. And such improvement would not necessarily be only temporary. It could be sustained in the long run, and every future situation could be subject to further improvement. Furthermore, such comprehensive improvement was not only possible; it was even likely to happen because one had gained insight into the conditions for it to emerge. This change of expectations was the invention of progress. As we shall see, it is these events to which those of the present provide the mirror. They mark the moment when the race between hare and hedgehog started. We will not be able to run it again, but to understand where we are now we have to review its course.

By 1800, the re-interpretation of the idea of progress had such pronounced effects that historians have spoken of a “rupture in societal consciousness”, more precisely associated with the French Revolution as the moment of breakthrough of the new concept [Koselleck – Reichardt 1988]. In possibly the most striking formulation, Reinhart Koselleck has captured the emergence of the new idea of progress as the separation of the horizon of expectations from the space of experience, thus as the wide opening of the horizon of time [Koselleck 1979]. That which was possible in the future was no longer determined by the experiences of the past.

In comparison with any view of improvement held before, the new concept of progress marked a radical break. It connected normative advances in the human condition with a long and linear perspective. And it disconnected those advances from direct human agency; progress itself came to be endowed with causal agency. We can call this a strong

concept of progress. It envisaged a positive transformation in the human condition of a radical kind that had never been considered as even remotely possible before. Doing so, it detached the normative expectations regarding the future from the current evidence about social life in Europe – the place where this concept emerged – during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Put in these terms, one immediately recognizes our current distance from this conception of progress. We are not inclined to hold this strong belief any longer. Our doubts concern both the underlying philosophy of history, with its normative-evolutionist thrust, and the “method”, namely the detaching of expectations from experiences. Turning things around, it is precisely to better understand our experiences with progress that we need to inquire into the assumptions on which this concept of progress was built.

This inquiry quickly yields a first and very general result. Those whom we call Enlightenment thinkers shared one basic assumption on which everything else was built: they saw human beings as capable of autonomy and as endowed with reason. Reason allowed them the insight into the problems they were facing and the development of the means to solve them. Autonomy allowed them to choose the adequate means and to take the appropriate action. This is what enables improvement in terms of solving problems. Furthermore, human beings have memory and can learn. Therefore, rather than every generation having to address the same problem again, successive generations can build on the achievements of the earlier ones and improve on them. This connection of reason, autonomy and learning capacity is what creates the conditions for historical progress of humankind.

If this is so, one further question immediately arises, namely the question why there was not more and more sustained progress in human history up to 1800. But this question, too, found a plausible answer at the time. Humankind then stood only at the “exit from self-incurred immaturity” (Immanuel Kant). It had not yet dared to make full use of its capacity to reason; and often enough human beings had not been free, they were living under various forms of domination. But this was about to change, not least as a consequence of Enlightenment thought, so one assumed. And once the conditions for human beings to live autonomously and reason freely were created, then progress would impose itself and could no longer be stopped. With this additional insight, we not only understand why there was not that much progress before 1800; we are furthermore given reasons why expectations about future progress under conditions of autonomy should detach themselves from the past experiences made under conditions of “immaturity”.

The two preceding paragraphs are a caricature of Enlightenment thought. Hardly any thinker can be found who endorses this reasoning in such a simplistic way. But a caricature exaggerates features that are indeed there, and so does this one. In other words, without maintaining some commitment to the beneficial combination of freedom and reason, it would have been impossible to arrive at the strong notion of progress described further above, and to display the optimism that goes along with it.

Progress misconceived

In historical reality, however, freedom had by far not been achieved by all. Rather, a minority of free human beings exercised their autonomy with a view to dominating nature, others outside their own society, and the unfree majority in their own society. And this domination, in turn, was increasingly resisted by this unfree majority, by the

dominated others elsewhere and also by nature. Much of the “progress”, in the sense of transformation of the human condition, over the two centuries dominated by the strong concept, therefore, was not due to the interaction between free human beings, but resulted from domination and the resistance to domination.¹ Intellectually, clearly, the European nineteenth century stood in the shadow of the Enlightenment and its commitment to autonomy. But in terms of practices and institutions much less so. With the Vienna Congress of 1815, the revolutionary period was over for the time being. The revolutionary moments of 1830, 1848 and 1871 signal that the imaginary of autonomy was alive in Europe. But their occurrence and their suppression also demonstrate that European societies had not at all yet been transformed in the light of this imaginary. For reasons of this discrepancy between intellectual change and socio-political change, observers have misinterpreted the European nineteenth century as a history of progress based on autonomy and, accordingly, have exaggerated the consequences of autonomy. Critical theorists from Marx to Weber to Adorno, and with an echo in Lyotard, have assumed that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the undermining of autonomy in the process of its realization. Actual historical practice, however, was not shaped by generalized autonomy, but rather by the combination of an increase of autonomy of the European elites with domination over nature, over the majority of the European population and with colonial domination. From the elites’ point of view, this combination generated progress. From the point of view of critical theorists, it did not, but these theorists failed to recognize how progress had been derailed: not by the consequences of autonomy as such, but by the limited exercise of autonomy in combination with domination.

In some respects, the socio-political transformations engendered by such domination and the resistance to it may indeed have spelt progress, at some moment and in some place, in the sense of normative advances: progress of knowledge and material progress, but also progress of emancipation, inclusion and recognition. But such progress was not achieved on the grounds hypothesized by the advocates of the strong concept of progress. The important conclusion to be drawn from this insight, then, is that the withering away of progress in the recent past cannot be due to flaws in the Enlightenment idea of a progressive articulation of freedom and reason. That idea cannot even be said to have been refuted, as Lyotard put it. Because the conditions for its application were not fulfilled, rather, there was no way of knowing by experience whether it was flawed or not. In a world marked by domination, we do not know how and with which outcome human beings make use of their reason.

A short-lived return of progress

By the middle of the twentieth century it already seemed that the concept of progress had virtually been abandoned. In his posthumously published “Theses on history” of 1940, interpreting a painting by Paul Klee, Walter Benjamin evokes the image of the angel of history. The angel is looking towards the past, “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet”, but is driven towards the

¹ Some readers may see here an affinity to the reasoning proposed by critical theorists from Marx onwards, and some such affinity indeed exists. However, Marx and other critical theorists erred by following Enlightenment thinkers in the assumption that the era of full autonomy had already begun.

future, “to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward”, by a storm. “This storm is what we call progress.” In this reading, what for more than a century had been called progress is seen as indeed having powerful agential capacity, driving history, which is not in the hands of human beings. This image draws on the strongest version of the concept of progress that we identified at the beginning, progress itself as an agent. But now this “progress” has turned out to be an agent of destruction. A few years later, after the defeat of Nazism and the end of the Second World War, Karl Jaspers in *The origin and goal of history*, evokes a different image for a similar purpose: “World history may look like a chaos of chance events – in its entirety like the swirling waters of a whirlpool. It goes on and on, from one muddle to another, from one disaster to another, with brief flashes of happiness, with islands that remain for a short time protected from the flood, till they too are submerged” [Jaspers 1953: 270].

These authors try to interpret the disastrous first half of the twentieth century, and they come to the conclusion that there is no hope for progress, or worse, in Benjamin’s image, that the direction of history is one of increasing destruction. In the light of our earlier observations, however, we can read these philosophies of history much more contextually: What they signal is not the end of progress in general, but the end of European domination that engendered a particular kind of progress. This contextual reading finds confirmation in a second, comparative observation.

Apparently unperturbed by these European worries, namely, the concept of progress re-emerged, even in a rather strong form, but at a different site, in North America, reflecting the new hegemony in the world after the end of the Second World War. Looking from a position of victory rather than defeat, US authors often expressed optimism about addressing and solving the problems that still remained. In academic terms, this optimism was most clearly and strongly expressed in the sociology of modernization, which is the philosophy of history attached to the functionalist theory of “modern society”, as most prominently elaborated by Talcott Parsons.

This thinking drew on the Enlightenment commitment to freedom and reason, but developed yet another interpretation of it. Progress was now possible on the basis of the institutionalization of autonomy in a functionally differentiated “modern society”. It was suggested, on the one hand, that societies could be based on autonomy and initiative without risking unpredictability, because freedom was exercised in well-defined institutional frames, and on the other hand, that such initiative within these frames would produce further improvement through economic growth and scientific advance. This state had supposedly already been reached in some societies, most notably in the USA, and it was approached in some West European societies, while so-called Third World societies had embarked on a more long-term, but equally progressive path of “modernization and development”. Thus, the European despair of mid-century was swept away by the US enthusiasm of the 1960s. Even the last major political problem from the US point of view, the presence of Soviet socialism, would be solved by gradual processes of convergence driven by functional requirements.

But this enthusiasm proved to be short-lived: The protest movements of the 1960s, domestically as well as internationally, challenged the idea that an institutional situation had been reached in which smooth progress was possible. In turn, the failure of these movements to bring about significant political change in the West, jointly with the return

of economic crises, triggered the declaration of the end of all grand narratives, another declaration of the end of progress. It was as if the history from 1789 to 1940 repeated itself in fast motion between 1945 and 1979.

Thus, we need to take a closer look at the recent past to understand what happened to progress. More precisely, we need to ask three questions about the past half century: First, we need to understand in new terms the socio-political constellation that was created between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s, also known as the “trente glorieuses”, given that it had been misconceived as the functionally efficient institutionalization of freedom. Secondly, it remains an open question why decades of intense critical activity by social movements that often understood themselves as “progressive”, between the 1960s and the 1980s, resulted in the withering away of progress. And this withering away of progress itself, thirdly, needs to be more closely scrutinized. Just as the return of progress after the Second World War was short-lived because it was based on an erroneous socio-political diagnosis, the disappearance of progress from the political agenda may be due to a misreading of recent occurrences – and may be short-lived as well.

From formal domination to autonomy and critical interpretation: towards a new idea of progress

Progress within borders: organized modernity and its discontents

The global socio-political constellation around 1960 was widely perceived as relatively consolidated, as expressed in the then widespread use of the three-worlds image: a First World of liberal-democratic capitalism, a Second World of Soviet-style socialism; and a Third World of developing countries. This imagery was sociologically conceptualized from the First-World point of view as oneself having reached modernity, the status of “modern society”; the Second World constituting a deliberate and organized deviation but with trends of convergence of those two worlds; and the Third World still needing to undergo processes of “modernization and development”. These “worlds”, in turn, were composed of societies as unit elements, each of which, according to the dominant perception, had clearly demarcated borders and a state as a central institution with the effective power of monitoring the borders and organizing social life within the borders according to unified rules.

This imagery of orderliness and control also – in only apparent contradiction – extended to the expectations of progress. The stability of institutions was expected to channel change on predictable paths, making it possible to reap the benefits of progress without running the risks that come with entirely open horizons of the future. To grasp this ambiguous orientation towards the future, as both open and already known, it is useful to briefly distinguish dimensions of progress and their state at around 1960. *Progress of knowledge* was expected to be endlessly available for the benefit of society, but at the same time one had the closing of the last “knowledge gaps” in view, thus ruling out any unpleasant surprises in the further pursuit of new knowledge.² *Economic progress* was similarly to be

² The lead projects that then captured the scientific-technological imagination, significantly, have since then either been abandoned because of unsurpassable limits that made them unreasonable or seriously put into question because of the uncontrollable dangers that come with them: supersonic airtravel, manned space exploration, nuclear energy.

channelled into predictable paths. Keynesian demand management, socialist planning, and the development of a national industrial economy through import substitution policies were the strategies, as suited to one of the three “worlds” each, by which economic growth could be reached without suffering the cyclical downturns that had marked the earlier history of capitalism. Applying these government techniques, economic progress would not only be steady but also lastingly high, thus providing the material background for also accomplishing social and political progress.

While epistemic and economic progress namely were meant to continue in a controlled way, social and political progress were thought to be completed and consolidated. For *social progress*, emphasis was placed on inclusion, to be reached with the extension of the welfare state regimes so as to protect all members of society against all conceivable risks, “from the cradle to the grave”, as Winston Churchill put it in 1943. In Europe, both Western Europe and socialist Europe, even though by different means, comprehensive social inclusion was largely accomplished by the 1960s. In the USA, it was announced as the core objective of the “War on Poverty”, the key component of President Johnson’s “Great Society” programme. In “Third World” societies, similar social progress was at best distantly on the horizon. Inclusion within the “First World” relied on firm boundaries towards the “Third”. Significantly, furthermore, social progress through welfare state measures meant a standardization of life-situations and, together with a male bread-winner full-employment economy, of life-courses. Individualization, therefore, was not a central criterion for social progress at the time. *Political progress* was conceived in a similar manner, as accomplished in some parts of the world and as accomplishable everywhere, provided that a restricted view on such progress was accepted. Accomplishment was defined as free and equal “conventional” political participation, through which governments were elected that both had some degree of accountability towards the citizenry and were capable of designing and implementing policy programmes. This was reached in the “First World”, had found a particular interpretation in the “Second”, and would be reached through political modernization in the “Third”. The restricted view entailed that the existing states should be the containers of political progress, and that within them a suitable balance between participation in collective self-determination and effective implementation of the common rules was created, in all situations of doubt giving priority to the latter over the former.

This brief characterization of the state of progress, in terms of different dimensions, allows us to recognize that the ambiguous orientation towards progress in the organized modernity of the post-Second World War period, as both open and known, expressed a novel relation between experience and expectations. The experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, in particular, had suggested that the widely open horizon of expectations permitted the rise of undesirable, even disastrous experiences. In the terms developed above, these experiences had shown the limits of progress through domination, in particular the limits emerging from the risk that resistance to domination would lead to undesirable outcomes. The conclusion from those experiences was to narrow the horizon of expectations without closing it entirely, through the institutions of organized modernity. Or in other words, this was an attempt to select from the wide range of historically generated possibilities the limited number of those that appeared to be both functionally viable and normatively desirable.

With hindsight, one can see that this “choice” – resulting from decisions of the early post-war political and economic elites – was only temporarily sustainable because of this ambiguity towards progress, which led to contradictory orientations. On the one hand, the progressive imaginary created two centuries earlier was now to be taken more seriously as a guide to socio-political practices. In public debate, the existing socio-political constellation was no longer presented as a power regime in principle equal to others in history, but as a socio-political order subject to normative justifications. Thus, claims based on that imaginary – for individual liberty, collective self-determination, social justice – could not just be suppressed. They had to be addressed, in some way or other; and if they were not, pressure for change was likely to continue.

On the other hand, the particular form that this socio-political order took was shaped by the contingency of the moment. In this contingent context, significantly, the USA were the plausible site for developing the new view of progress for a number of reasons: They had been less directly a source of the disasters of the first half of the twentieth century. They had risen to be an economic power and transformed the economy into mass-consumption capitalism, thus had been successful in addressing the question of material needs. They had a reputation of greater political inclusion than European societies, despite the subjection of the native population and the discrimination of the African-American population; they thus appeared to have marked the direction of political progress. And up to this moment they had had a smaller role in colonial domination than Europe, presenting themselves rather as one of the first postcolonial societies.

More generally, the contingency of the moment entailed that the conclusions drawn from the earlier experiences were to be implemented in the context of existing state boundaries, economic structures, gender relations, colonial domination. These contingent elements had a double meaning: they were there and thus unavoidable ingredients for the building of organized modernity; but they were not justified as such and often difficult to justify. They were used to build the institutions within which further progress was to occur in a channelled, controlled way; but they could turn out to be barriers to desirable progress and thus could be challenged by critique and protest.

This characterization provides a key to understanding the dismantling of organized modernity which proceeded at a rapid pace from the 1960s onwards. In the then so-called Third World, movements for national liberation called for decolonization and collective self-determination, these struggles reaching a high point around 1960. In the then so-called First World, the year 1968 marked a climax of workers’ and students’ contestation, often seen as the combination of a political and cultural revolution, the former calling for intensification of political participation, the latter for widening the space for personal self-realization. In the then so-called Second World, protest called for both wider spaces of individual expression and for forms of collective self-determination that were not limited by the dominant interpretation of historical materialism, including self-determination as political collectivities that had not been recognized as such. In the wake of 1968, time-honoured issues were returned to the political agenda, with greater force and urgency, by the feminist movement and the ecological movement, calling for equality as well as recognition of difference and for critical reflection on the industrial transformation of the earth respectively. During the later twentieth century, new movements of the poor and excluded emerged in response to the consequences of

global economic-financial restructuring, calling for social justice and inclusion. Where democracy had been abolished by military regimes, they merged with movements for the restoration of liberty and democracy. And where exclusion and oppression had a marked ethnic/racial component, contestations centered on political and cultural claims for collective self-determination.

Most of these movements can be called progressive because they advocated social and political progress by evoking the existing imaginary of such progress and by denouncing the restrictions that had been imposed on its realization. Some of these movements, furthermore, called for a rethinking of progress, criticizing the form in which progress had historically been conceived and supposedly realized. This is true for critics of epistemic-economic progress, pointing towards the increasing separation, and often contradiction, between actual epistemic and economic practices and the requirements for good answers to epistemic and economic problems. Such critics often challenged the very mechanism of progress in these areas, as it was conceptualized historically. Some critics of social and political progress, in turn, called for a reconsideration of the contingencies that led to the present view of such progress, rather than of the principles. This is true for movements that challenge current polities and their borders as providing inadequate frameworks for collective self-determination. It is also true for protest that calls for rectification of historical injustice. While such calls may be interpreted as calls for social progress, they also insist that equal freedom in the present is an insufficient way to reach such progress.

Protest and progress at the end of formal domination

If the 1960s and the 1970s, to some extent also later years, were marked by strong protest movements, and if we have good reason to see these movements as having aimed for progress, to a considerable degree successfully, why then did progress wither away during this same period? To answer this question now in more detail, we need to make some general conceptual and historical observations and then consider those in the light of this most recent socio-political transformation, the destructuring of the organized modernity of the second postwar period.

Socio-political change often occurs through re-interpretation of concepts that underpin the self-understanding of societies [Wagner 2012, ch. 3]. Progress, then, is enhanced by re-interpretations that are suggested by the observation of persistent problems and the search for novel solutions to them. Social and political progress, in particular, is driven by protest against unsatisfactory situations: situations in which problems are addressed in ways that lack normative justification and/or functional efficiency. Across the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, as suggested above, domination has been the prevailing engine of “progress”, whereas critique of domination has been a crucial way of re-interpreting progress. Equal freedom was not the historical starting-point of the march of progress, in contrast to the postulate of Enlightenment thought. Rather, it became the core component of the socio-political imaginary of progress, defining the goal of progress yet to be achieved. Instead of already effectively guiding prevailing practices, this imaginary inspired the resistance to those practices. Prevailing practices in Europe, and later “the West”, namely, brought “progress” about through domination: over nature, over other societies, and over sizable parts of the population in their own societies.

Before the Second World War, these practices of domination were still explicitly justified, even though they were increasingly contested. After the War, though, the mobilization of societies for war and the justification of war as a fight against illegitimate regimes changed the situation [Halperin 2016]. The organized modernity of the postwar period meant to bring the prevailing practices in line with the socio-political imaginary. The societies of the First and Second Worlds claimed to be inclusive and egalitarian in social and political terms and committed to collective self-determination, even though in different understandings. The right to collective self-determination of the colonized societies was increasingly recognized, even though often after colonial wars and civil wars and by some colonial powers earlier than by others.

Looking now again at the progressive movements that destructured organized modernity, it is possible to compare them with earlier such movements. There are three main components to them: Most similar to earlier protest, first, there were movements aiming at removing the remnants of formal domination. As such, they have proven to be enormously successful by the 1990s. The anti-colonial movement largely reached its aim with the end of the last European colonial empire, the Portuguese one, in 1974 and with the end of apartheid in the early 1990s. Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes could no longer be maintained. The feminist movement secured full legal equality for women in many countries by the 1970s, preceded by socialist countries much earlier, though not in most predominantly Islamic countries, an exception being Turkey. Civil rights movements, broadly understood, fought formal discrimination in many matters, such as ethnic and linguistic minorities, sexual orientation, race, many of which are removed from law books, even though they often continue in practice.

Second, the ecological movement aimed at ending the instrumental exploitation of nature and at returning the notion of economic progress to a substantive understanding of human material needs. In a sense, this is protest against domination, namely domination over nature, but not protest against domination by some groups of human beings over others. The current record of this kind of protest is ambiguous. It has had considerable success in bringing the ecological issue onto the societal and political agenda. Nature-transforming activities are now in much greater need of justification than they were half a century ago, often even subject to institutional procedures of evaluation before being approved. At the same time, however, the scale of nature transformation has further increased: the industrialization of many “emerging” economies far outweighs the de-industrialization of “advanced” economies; and resource extraction techniques and processes go ever further in transforming nature. The prevailing notion at this moment, expressed in the debate about climate change, is that destruction proceeds at higher speed than the attempts at halting or reversing destruction.

Thirdly, some protests aimed at re-interpreting the emphases given to components of social and political progress. In societies where inclusion had largely been achieved but had led to the standardization of life-courses, individualization became a core concern. In societies where state capacity had been given priority over actual practices of collective self-determination, claims for intensifying political participation were made. This protest took a rather novel attitude to progress: it no longer aimed at overcoming formal domination, it aimed at redefining the social and political setting in substantive terms. It, too, was quite successful in one sense, but much less so in another: It succeeded in undermining the

dominant socio-political self-understanding within the varieties of organized modernity. But it failed in elaborating a new hegemonic self-understanding that would be normatively superior to the preceding one, and thus mark progress.

In sum, the progressive movements that resembled most those of the earlier past, those aiming at overcoming formal domination, have largely been successful. Their success explains the core components of the withering away of progress: Progress through domination was increasingly limited by successful resistance to domination. And the more resistance to domination marked progress, to the point of nearing the end of formal domination, the less central this kind of progress will be for the future.

Due to the fact that this kind of progress was the one that had been in the centre of critical thought, the ambivalent notion of exhaustion/completion of historical progress could arise. During the 1990s, specifically, there was a widespread sense that critique had been disarmed in the ongoing socio-political transformation, and it was difficult to see if and how it could be reconstructed. At the same time, within critical debate this apparent success was hardly ever perceived as success, and this at least for some good reasons: new problems arose and old problems returned, namely the ecological crisis and social injustice respectively, and the political capacity to address them decreased, even dramatically so.

A look at the South African situation is enlightening in this respect. Under apartheid, South Africa had a vibrant critical-intellectual debate focusing on the connection between racial domination and the particular form of South African capitalism. At the same time, it had a forceful social and political movement for national liberation, the core concern of which was the end of colonial domination by claiming equal freedom and equal rights for all South Africans. This domination was the target of critique, and its overcoming was what progress meant. With the end of apartheid this aim was reached. At the current moment, South African society faces numerous problems, most of which can be traced to the legacy of colonial domination: pronounced structures of social inequality due to apartheid segregation and injustice; an economy that is focused on resource extraction for a global market rather than satisfying the needs of the South African population; a public administration that had been created to serve well a minority but is inadequate for the needs of the majority in terms of education, health, transport infrastructure etc. At the same time, there is a societal and political majority committed to an agenda of social transformation and to addressing these problems. But critical-intellectual debate is weak and disoriented, and there is considerable ambiguity about the kind of progress that is possible and how it can be reached as well as pronounced doubt about whether any significant progress is possible at all. South Africa is not exceptional. Rather, it is exemplary because of the radical transformation it recently experienced by moving from violent formal domination to the commitment to personal and collective autonomy. It shows us that it is necessary to explore more insistently what progress means after the abolition of most institutional forms of domination. We need to understand how to translate the widely held idea of self-propelled progress as emerging from the Enlightenment combination of freedom and reason, once formal domination has been overcome, into a view of progress as a problem of collective self-determination, of collective agency.

For the remainder of this article I want to insist that it is erroneous to overlook or denigrate the enormous progress that has been made in overcoming formal domination – factually erroneous because the achievements exist, but also politically erroneous because

this view leads to an underestimation of normative forces in history. But I also want to demonstrate that the regress that has occurred was part of the same socio-political transformation that spelt the (near) end of formal domination and that it is even related to protests that aimed at progress. In other words, critique and protest provide re-interpretations that aim at normatively superior solutions, but they are not in control of the interpretations they provide and may end up supporting regress, the consequences of which outweigh the progressive achievements.

The trap of hegemonic discourse: the erasure of space and time

The protests that worked towards the dismantling of the conventions of organized modernity appeared in the form of rebellion against imposed constraints, in normative terms, or as consequences drawn from the insights into functional deficiency, in some instances as a combination of both criticisms. But they contained only a weak image of a constructive re-interpretation of modernity. The key elements of this image are all related to the aim of ending formal domination: the general idea of equal individual rights, such as in the women's movement, the civil rights movement in the USA or the struggle against apartheid; the idea of inclusive collective self-determination, or: democracy, in liberation from colonial rule (including the particular case of South Africa) and from authoritarian rule as in Southern Europe, East Asia and Latin America; and the ideas of freedom from particular constraints in the forms of commercial freedom, media freedom, freedom of movement, and of freedom for self-realization.

In the light of these objectives, much of the socio-political change that occurred can be described in terms of normative achievements, of progress: of recognition, of freedom, of equality. This, precisely, is where the success of contestations can be located. When looking at the overall socio-political transformation, however, qualifications have to be added. Assessing recent change in terms of overcoming formal domination tends to overlook the fact that institutional components of organised modernity that were not as such containers of formal domination were dismantled in parallel. The normative assessment of these processes, however, is much more ambivalent, to say the least: The capacity of states to elaborate and implement public action diminished. In particular, the centre-piece of organized modernity, the steering of national economies was abandoned. As a consequence, commercial and financial flows are increasingly beyond any control. More generally, institutionalized collective action was delegitimized in the conceptual shift from "government" to "governance". In parallel, the institutional frames for collective self-determination have been weakened, partly deliberately in favour of supranational or global co-operation, partly because of an alleged escape of socio-political phenomena from the view and grasp of political institutions.

Every major socio-political transformation entails the dismantling of existing institutions. But this dismantling is often accompanied by the building of new institutions, or by giving new purpose and meaning to existing institutional containers. The transformation of European societies from the middle of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, in terms of increasing inclusion and recognition, is a strong example for the building of collective institutions to address problems that the earlier restricted liberal modernity of Europe had created. The contestations of organised modernity in the late twentieth century, in contrast, have often had the oppressive, exploiting or excluding nature of existing

institutions as their target, and have therefore been aiming at de-institutionalization in the first place. As an unintended side-effect, this orientation has tended to incapacitate collective action: on the one hand, because specific existing institutions are weakened, and on the other, because institutional rebuilding in general is delegitimized in the name of some generic concept of equal individual and collective freedom.

There was a moment in this exit from organized modernity, during the 1980s and early 1990s, when this weak image of an ongoing re-interpretation of modernity gained stronger contours. At this moment, much public political philosophy suggested that a generalized commitment to individual freedom and to collective self-determination was about to be globally and unproblematically implemented. It would be accompanied and underpinned by an idea of economic freedom that suggested that constraints to economic action are both freedom-limiting and dysfunctional for economic performance and thus need to be removed.

These politico-philosophical ideas translated into a political discourse about “human rights and democracy” and an economic discourse about a strong return to market freedoms and free trade, both in temporarily hegemonic positions. Furthermore, these discourses found partial institutional expression in various forms: in the abolishing of domestic forms of economic regulation; in the lowering of international barriers to economic exchange; in the introduction of the “responsibility to protect” principle in international law in tension with the principle of state sovereignty; in elements of the internationalization of penal law; in the tendency to identify public protest movements with an expression of collective self-determination, among others.

Let me come back to the hare and the hedgehog. At the beginning of the race, the male hedgehog described its telos as a world of free human beings creating steady progress through their interactions, and the hare started to run. When much later the hedgehog’s wife told the exhausted hare that the race was over and won, the hare could not believe that this was true, but was not able to say why. He could not tell the difference between the two hedgehogs. This is the problem critical thinking about progress faces today: What is the difference between the promise of emancipation and equal freedom more than two centuries ago and the apparently widespread institutionalization of equal freedom today?

In other words, the question is what is wrong, if anything, with the discourse about “human rights and democracy” and the idea that any elimination of constraints is an increase in freedom. The problem consists in the fact that there is clearly something right about these notions, that they point to valid normative concerns, while at the same time that which is wrong with them is much more difficult to identify. The commitments to freedom, human rights and democracy present themselves as normatively uncontestable. The abolition of constraint to human action and of power over human beings appears self-justifying. This, however, is exactly the trap of hegemonic discourse: On the one hand, freedom and democracy are those basic normative concepts that one has to embrace. In this sense, they are indeed self-justifying. On the other hand, they are presented as the unsurpassable reference of all political debate, overruling all other considerations, which they are not. Even though valid and crucial, these concepts are not sufficient to guide political debate on their own. Rather, they open up further questions that need to be answered by drawing on other resources as well. To avoid falling into the trap – or better: to get

out of it, since much of current debate is trapped – we need to recall the time-honoured insight that comprehensive evaluative concepts tend to be essentially contested. They may be valid in a very general sense, but they do not lend themselves to application in the straightforward sense that specific action in the world can be derived from these concepts and equated with steps towards realizing them.

The history of these concepts is marked by a curious oscillation. As inalienable rights and popular sovereignty, they emerged with the Enlightenment and inspired the late-eighteenth-century revolutions. Political debate after the revolutions, though, devoted much energy to criticizing the concept of abstract freedom and prevailing notions about the constitution of modern polities. And in fact, socio-political transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century re-introduced notions of social bonds and collective commitments. Current debate can usefully draw on the earlier period of conceptual critique and transformative practice. The retrieval of those debates, however, will be insufficient unless it is connected to the socio-political transformations of our time. Exactly with this objective in mind, we have tried to reconstruct the dominant self-understanding of the varieties of organized modernity after the Second World War as well as the dynamics that led to their destructuring. The public political philosophy that briefly became dominant afterwards needs to be interpreted as the spontaneous conceptual reflection of this destructuring. Within sociological research, the idea arose that collective phenomena of all kinds – state, nation, class, society – were disintegrating, due to two dominant tendencies, the ones of globalization and individualization. Like the sociological theorem of globalization and individualization, the public-political discourse suggested that there was – and: should be – little, or nothing, between the individual human being and the globe. Every social phenomenon that stood in-between tended to be considered as having freedom-limiting effects. Significantly, the notion of democracy, which presupposes a specific decision-making collectivity and thus appears to stand necessarily in an intermediate position between the individual and the globe, tended to be redefined. Rather than referring to a concrete, historically given collectivity, processes of self-determination were, on the one side, related to social movements without institutional reference, and on the other side, projected to the global level as the coming cosmopolitan democracy. We can characterize this conceptual tendency as the *erasure of space*. In a second step, we can identify a similar tendency towards the *erasure of time*. The individual human beings in question are seen as free and equal, in particular as equally free. Thus, their life-histories and experiences are no longer seen as giving them a particular position in the world from which they speak and act. And political orders are seen as associations of such individuals who enter into a social contract with each other, devoid of any particular history.

This is the image of a utopia. Progress is here the liberation from determination by the space and time one was born in. The image can historically be found in theories of social contract, from John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But for these authors, and including their predecessor Thomas Hobbes, these were thought-experiments trying to find the bases on which peaceful human living together was possible at all (for Hobbes) and on which further improvements in the human condition would arise. In the outgoing twentieth century, in contrast, this image evoked imminent possibilities. It suggested the progress that was immediately on the horizon. This idea of liberation was then often sustained by a mode of critique that – in general, quite rightly – does not “deduce from the

form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but (...) will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think”.

Such critique has been a major force for the dismantling of organized modernity from the 1960s onwards, be it in the struggle against colonial domination or in the Northern “1968”. But it has also for too long and too often embarked on “the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom”, leading into misconceived “projects that claim to be global or radical”. These projects are those that aim at the erasure of time and space. They come in a variety of political forms: from the idea of individual enterprising selves relating to each other through self-regulating markets to the idea of individual human rights without any notion of the agency that guarantees these rights to the idea of cosmopolitan democracy devoid of an understanding of forms of political communication.

What, then, is to be done? In the words of the author already quoted before, the “work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take” (all above quotes: [Foucault 1984: 46]). Without historical inquiry and reality test, the abstract reasoning about freedom and its consequences in terms of dismantling boundaries and forgetting experience, rather than an ally, becomes the opponent in the struggle over interpreting our present and identifying that progress that is both possible and desirable.

Outlook: preparing a reality test for identifying future progress

Everything preceding in this essay can be read as a contribution to this historical and conceptual inquiry. The last step to take is to provide at least some elements for a test of current reality for possible and desirable progress. At the current moment, the utopian image of progress as liberation from the constraints of historical time and lived space still exists, but it has lost plausibility and persuasiveness to a considerable degree. This is due to occurrences that have been interpreted as signs of its inadequacy, such as: a sequence of economic crises across the world; increasing concern about past injustice impacting on the present; the increased awareness of the consequences of human-induced climate change; regional crises of democracy; lack of criteria for evaluating international conflicts. In the light of such occurrences, attempts at reconstruction are currently being made that are consciously situated in social space and acknowledge the historicity of human social life.

In some way, the events in Teheran in 1979, often referred to as the Iranian Revolution, are an early example of such reconstruction. As specific as the Iranian circumstances were, they can now be seen as an opening towards a broader understanding of political possibilities in the present, since then intensified not only by the strengthening of political Islam but also by “emerging” novel political self-understandings reaching from the variety of “progressivist” political majorities in Latin America to the transformation-oriented post-apartheid polity in South Africa to post-communist China. The acceleration of European integration since the Maastricht Treaty, accompanied by intense debates about the European self-understanding, is generally recognized as a major such attempt at regionally based world-interpretation – even though it is currently sometimes seen as on the verge of

failing. More recently, the emergence of BRICS entails a further proposal to re-constitute specific spatiality – the global South – and temporality – rectification of past Western (Northern) domination. These observations suggest that one can analyze the present as an ongoing attempt at re-interpreting modernity, with again significant regional varieties against the background of earlier experiences with modernity – in a context of greater connectedness that should not be misunderstood as actual globalization in the sense of erasing boundaries. This attempt is far from reaching a new consolidated form, but a key preparatory task for elaborating an adequate new concept of progress lies in identifying the main contours of these present processes of re-interpretation.

Against the background of the preceding observations, we can understand the past half century as the transformation of a globe composed of a set of consolidated regional, indeed: spatially defined, interpretations of modernity into a globe with de-structured social relations of highly variable extension and significance, but with the projection of a boundaryless setting populated by unattached individuals looming large. In very general terms, then, the current struggle over re-interpretations of modernity is characterized by two fundamental tensions: – the tension between those who hold that the acceptance of the principle of equal freedom supports a view of the human being as holder of equal rights *in this time*, on the one side, and those who hold that the consequences of past experiences, not least experiences of oppression and injustice, weigh on the present and that there is a need for differential consideration of rights and normative claims, on the other. This is the question about the *temporal configuration of the present*; – the tension between those who hold that *boundaries* limit the expression of autonomy, both political and economic, with negative normative and functional consequences, on the one side, and those who hold that boundaries are a precondition for the exercise of collective autonomy, which in turn is a necessity for the creation of spaces of personal freedom, on the other. This is the question about the *spatial configuration of the present*.

It is evident at the briefest look that there is intense struggle over the adequate resolution of these tensions in the contemporary world. A new notion of progress is needed to help identifying the way towards the most adequate resolution. At the least the contours of it can be suggested here: In conceptual terms, it will replace the strong concept of progress as an almost self-propelled force of history with a notion that focuses on agency, imagination and critique. In contextual terms, it will need to address the situation of our time, in two main respects. After the end of formal domination, first, future progress needs to be progress in the practice of collective autonomy, thus political progress. Politics need to be understood today in terms of a radical commitment to democratic agency, giving different meaning to the widely used concept of “democratization”, which in practice often entails a decreasing capacity to act. The daunting task is to, at the same time, reverse the recent decline of state-based political capacity, create political capacity in global coordination, and do so in unprecedented forms of democratic agency. The building of such democratic collective agency needs to go along with the definition of the central problems that such agency should address. That is why, second, the other key concern of our time should be progress towards a more adequate interpretation of the world we live in. Such progress can only be achieved in struggle against those who have an interest in promoting world-interpretations that leave their privileges intact. After the end of formal domination, current work at world-interpretation needs to focus on the identification of new forms of

domination, in particular those that deny the current relevance of historical injustice by claiming that all human beings are now equal and equally free in the present. And it needs to combat the hubristic inclination of considering human beings as actually capable of mastering all aspects of their existence on this earth. Elaborating such a notion of progress for our time, therefore, will invite us to rethink the relation between our space of experience and our horizon of expectations.

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