**progress/进步(Jìn Bù)**

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| European Perspective | Michael Kahn-Ackermann | 17 Feb 2022 |

**The idea of progress in the West**

The 19th century was the century of great European ideologies, though most of them would not have their global, and often devastating, impact until the 20th century. Nationalism, Marxism, anarchism, capitalist liberalism, racism, Social Darwinism are just a few examples of the most influential ideologies. Despite the differences in their contents and goals, they were, and still are, driven by the idea of “progress”, or more precisely, by the idea of the “progress of humanity”.

The historical-philosophical idea that the history of mankind is to be read as a “history of progress” has become so entrenched in the minds of most people of the global modern age that it has almost taken on the characteristic of being self-evident. Most of the epoch-making discoveries or inventions of mankind, from the use of fire and the invention of the wheel and printing to the steam engine and the internal combustion engine, from electricity to the airplane and the Internet are all understood as milestones of “progress”. The same holds true for great scientific deeds, from the heliocentric view of the world to the theory of gravity, the theory of evolution, relativity, and quantum theory.

At the same time, the idea of “progress” is very young, a child of 18th and especially 19th century Europe. Much like the term itself, the idea of “progress” as a historical-philosophical concept emerged in the context of the European Enlightenment. There is no actual “father” of the idea of progress; great thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx may have developed the concept, but they did not invent it. It was the rapid development of scientific knowledge, the rapid increase in new technologies, and the onset of industrialization that created the conditions for the idea of a general and unstoppable “progress of mankind”. It replaced the redemption idea of Christianity that was predominant in Europe and according to which, the future of mankind and the end of history are determined and brought about by a divine intervention in the form of a judgment, without mankind directly contributing to it through its own activity. In its global spread, the idea of the “progress of mankind” displaced all systems of philosophy of history of other times and cultures, for example, the cyclic understanding of history of antiquity and Chinese culture.

Naturally a number of important inventions already existed, and scientific and mathematical knowledge had been expanding well before the emergence of the idea of “human progress”. We need only recall the great discoveries of early human history: the developments of mathematics in the Indian and Arab world, the important inventions of the Chinese Middle Ages. But in the cultures in which they took place, they were understood merely as improvements of existing knowledge and technologies, and not as expressions and proofs of a historical-philosophical idea of progress.

During the 19th century, the idea of “human progress” became the dominant interpretation of historical processes and the most important legitimization of the exercise of power. This began in Europe, taking shape through various ideological forms. This belief that they were representatives and bearers of progress shaped the self-image of many individuals, especially political leaders, philosophers, and entrepreneurs, as well as entire social groups and states. Depending on the ideological form they took, they developed different views of nature, purpose and ways of advancement of progress.. There were and are fundamentally different views on whether or not progress is heading toward an inevitable and definable goal, what this goal might look like, and by what means its achievement can be accelerated, slowed down, or even stopped. In nationalism, progress aims to form a unitary state based on the same language, history, culture, or “race” with inviolable sovereignty; Marxism seeks global communism transcending borders, overcoming poverty, and human alienation; anarchism, the absolute liberation of the individual from the constraints of domination; racism, the purity of a “race” conceived as superior to other ethnic groups and the realization of its claim to domination; social Darwinism, the emergence of genetically ever more highly developed “supermen”. Meanwhile, capitalist liberalism knows no defined goal of “human progress”; “progress” exists in the endless growth of productive forces and material prosperity without an ultimate end goal. All these different ideologies were and are interconnected, some of them even contradictory at first sight. Soviet and Chinese Marxism were able to combine with nationalism, even with certain elements of liberal capitalism in China as of recent; liberal capitalism was able to combine with nationalism and racism to form world-wide imperialism, etc. Therefore, there is no generally accepted and binding definition of “progress” that goes beyond vague terms like “upward”, “forward”, or “higher” development. Regardless of the form or combination, all these ideologies share the belief in an unstoppable “human progress” of some kind.

The idea of being the representative and bearer of “progress” became the central legitimation strategy of European colonialism and imperialism in the 19th century and of Marxism in the 20th century, with the notion being to carry this “progress” into non-European world regions and societies. Different conceptions of the nature and goal of “progress” became essential elements of a global system competition in the 20th century. Along the way, the idea of progress also penetrated non-European cultures which originally had no understanding of history driven by ideologies of progress. In the 20th century, the idea of progress became the central driving force of development and the justification of domination worldwide. Today, almost every political, social, and economic goal legitimizes itself as a contribution to progress. The idea of progress permeates all areas of social activity, from science and technology to law, economics, politics, medicine, and the social system. Almost every partial innovation in these areas is now considered, or at least justified, as part of general progress. These specific dimensions of progress, even if they are mutually beneficial and interdependent, are dominated today by “economic progress”, which has replaced “civilizational progress”. In the conceptual pair of “development” and “underdevelopment”, the division of the world into developing and developed states, the concepts of development and progress merged with each other. Fundamentally, “development” is now understood worldwide as “progress”. It is not accidental that the modern conceptualizations of “progress” and “development” emerged at about the same time and place.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the idea of “human progress” has increasingly been facing a credibility crisis. The experiences of imperialist exploitation and oppression, of two world wars, and of the crimes against humanity committed by National Socialism and Stalinism which have shaken the idea of “civilizational progress” have played a part in this; however, new insights have emerged, especially in the “developed West”, that call into question the very centre of the idea of progress, namely the unconditional belief in the blessings of scientific-technological and economic progress. Since the report of the Club of Rome, we have become increasingly aware that regardless of the political and ideological constitution of a society, the essential instruments of implementing the idea of progress have fatal consequences: the material resources available to us for their realization are limited, and the way they are exploited and used can have catastrophic consequences. The progress of medicine has helped a significant portion of the population in achieving better health and a longer life; yet this has also led to an increase in the world population that turns this gain into a potential threat. The climate crisis is another stage in the decay of the idea of progress. The idea of “human progress” has become fragile, despite the fact that representatives of ruling elites and economic interests cling to it.