**progress/进步(Jìn Bù)**

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

**The idea of progress in the West**

Different from the concepts we discussed yesterday and today in the morning it is hard to talk about an European perspective on the concept of „progress“. The reason is simple: „Progress“ as a concept of philosophy of history is a purely European concept, there is no comparable concept in other cultures. As far as I understand, there is no word to translate „progress“ into Classic Chinese, the word used in modern Chines, „进步“, didn‘t exist earlier as late Qing dynasty und was brought into Chinese from the Japanese translation of the also there unknown „western“ concept and term of „progress“. What makes the case of „process“ even more special, is the fact, that it is a very young concept also in the European context, with no conceptual parallel in the European past. Even the term of „progress“ as a term of philosophy of history and political philosophy didn’t exist before the period of enlightenment, i. e. the later part of 18th.century.

It replaced the redemption idea of Christianity that was predominant in Europe, 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. Introduced to China about a hundred years later, it replaced the cyclic understanding of the process of history, as a change of dynasties according their moral decline respectively merit. Unterstanding of the process of history as a cycle prevailed also in the prechristian Greek and Roman antique.

Nevertheless, the idea of „progress“, especially of „human progress“ or „progress of mankind“ was probably the most successful ideological product of all the post- enlightenment ideologies of the European 19th. century, as nationalism, Marxism, anarchism, capitalist liberalism, racism, Social Darwinism, to name only the most influential. More explicitely, the idea of progress became the common base of all these ideologies, no matter how they differ in other respect. The ideological concept of „progress“ has no identifiable „father“ or „fathers“, there is no founding text of the idea of progress. Great thinkers and scientists such as Kant, Hegel, Marx and Darwin have contributed to the development of 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 was Western imperialism, which understood itself as „bearer of progress“, which spread the concept of „progress“ in all its ideological variants (including anti-imperialist ideologies like Marxism, Anarchism and Nationalism) all over the world. Globally the idea of “human progress” became the dominant interpretation of historical processes and the most important legitimization of the exercise of power.

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. 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.

In the 20th century being the representative and bearer of “progress” became the central legitimation strategy of liberal Capitalism and marxist Socialism. Different conceptions of the nature and the goal of “progress” became essential elements of a global system competition, carrying the idea of „progress“ into non-European cultures, which originally had no understanding of history driven by „progress of mankind“.

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. 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 of mankind.

The specific dimensions of „progress“ are dominated today by “economic progress”, resp. „economic progress“ driven by „scientific progress“ which has replaced the original concept of “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 at the same place.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the idea of “human progress” is increasingly facing a credibility crisis. The experiences of imperialist exploitation and oppression, of two world wars and 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 world”, 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 many representatives of ruling elites and economic interests cling to it.