

The Ambivalence of Progress

Ambivalenca napredka

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11

DEFINING PROGRESS

The question of progress represents one of the central issues in human history.¹ As we reflect on the transformations that have occurred over time, it is natural to ask whether they have improved the lives of ordinary people and what their broader significance has been. Is humanity better off now than it was in previous eras? Does the trajectory of history point toward further improvement? Although the primary aim of historians is to analyze rather than evaluate the past, it nevertheless lies within the scope of historiography to consider such macro-historical questions.

The purpose of this special issue is to directly engage with the debates surrounding the concept of progress. It is therefore useful to start with a brief reflection on the meaning of this term. Robert Nisbet, one of the historians who has examined the conceptual history of progress in depth, provides a useful initial definition: *“the idea of progress holds that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future.”*²

This definition can be unpacked into several components. The first concerns the temporal structure that is implied by the concept of progress. At its core, progress presupposes a linear conception of temporality in which the future is regarded as better than the present, and the present better than the past. While this may appear self-evident to us today, it is far from the only way of organizing temporal experience. For much of human history, alternative frameworks predominated.

A static conception of time, for instance, conceives the past, present, and future as essentially identical. This is the structure of frameworks cen-

1 This special issue grew out of the doctoral and postdoctoral workshop “The Ambivalence of Progress,” held in Ljubljana in November 2024. I would like to thank the Slovene History Research Team for making the workshop possible, and the journal *Retrospektive* for generously providing the venue for this publication. Special thanks are due to Professor Rok Stergar, Associate Professor Kornelija Ajlec, and Associate Professor Peter Mikša.

2 Nisbet, Robert. *History of the Idea of Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 1980, 4–5.

tered on timeless and omnipotent deities, whose existence is not marked by beginnings or endings and is not affected by temporal change. The static understanding of time has underpinned religious worldviews across numerous cultures and historical periods.³

A cyclical conception of time, by contrast, considers the future as a mirror of the past. While this view was especially prevalent in antiquity, it can be vividly illustrated by the Renaissance and the Reformation. Both of these ideological currents distinguished between a distant golden age – whether the glories of antiquity or the beginnings of Christianity – and the more recent past. The latter was understood as a dark medieval period that they sought to overcome. The aim of humanists and Protestants, then, was to reshape the present not by imagining a new future, but by restoring an idealized past.⁴

The linear conception of time implies either a regressive or progressive succession of the past, present, and future. Christian eschatology provides an example (in certain respects), as it is structured around the three decisive moments of Genesis, the advent of Christ, and the final judgment. These events are ordered in a linear sequence with multiple distinct elements. In other words, no elements of the past return, and each stage represents something different from what precedes or follows it.⁵

However, Christian eschatology is not a direct parallel to the idea of progress as it is understood in modernity. The reason is that the central developments within this framework are preordained by the transcendent divine will. Even though human affairs constantly change, the ultimate horizon is determined by the Apocalypse. The future is therefore not subject to change.

3 Pomian, Krzysztof. *Red časa*. Trans. Vera Troha. Ljubljana: Krtina, 2010, 54.

4 *Ibid.*, 61–66.

5 *Ibid.*, 55–60.

It is only when this eschatological framework is set aside that the concept of progress attains its modern form.⁶ Since the advent of the Enlightenment, the future has no longer been understood to be a mirror of the past or pre-determined by forces external to history. Instead, it has become a domain of new possibilities, ones that can be imagined as significant improvements from the present. Crucially, the link between the present and the future is understood to lie in human action. Humanity has been called upon to determine its own destiny, as it were.⁷

The modern notion of progress thus entails both a particular temporal framework and an identification of the agent responsible for historical change. What about the contents of that change? What counts as improvement?

Nisbet identifies two central themes that have traditionally addressed this issue. The first is the advancement of knowledge and the related improvement of technology. Human understanding accumulates over generations because each generation can build on the intellectual achievements of its predecessors. This is the image captured by the metaphor of “standing on the shoulders of giants”: present generations see further not because individuals have superior capacities, but because they inherit a higher starting point. A parallel development is the advancement of technology, which provides humans with the ability to master their environment.⁸

The second theme that has traditionally constituted the substance of progress involves the consideration of moral and spiritual development. Improvements in knowledge and technologies do not, by themselves, ensure that humanity is better off. Indeed, many thinkers have argued that technological progress can coincide with, or even produce, moral degradation. Whatever perspective is assumed, the point to emphasize is that

6 Koselleck, Reinhart. *Pretekla prihodnost: prispevki k semantiki zgodovinskih časov*. Trans. Igor Kramberger. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 1999, 307–308.

7 *Ibid.*, 313–339.

8 Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 5.

any conception of progress presupposes an interpretation of the good life against which past and present can be evaluated.⁹

Taken together, the basic components of the concept of progress can be portrayed as follows. Humanity begins in simple societies that are guided by superstition and in possession of only primitive tools. Through the use of their own talents and abilities, humans develop better understanding and sophisticated technologies, gradually mastering nature and improving their condition. The culmination of this trajectory is the emergence of modern science and the Industrial Revolution. Given the long-term persistence of these trends and their intensification in modernity, there is no reason to expect them to end. The future looks bright.

This view of history has been extremely influential since the Enlightenment. At the same time, however, the history of the idea of progress is also the history of those who oppose it.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST PROGRESS

Skepticism regarding the concept of progress takes many forms and can be found across the political spectrum. Conservatives tend to reject the very premise of a forward movement, and instead defend the preservation of traditional values and institutions. Left-wing critics, on the other hand, often argue that the concept of progress obscures the actual historical record. In this sense, progress is not a neutral descriptive term but a highly ideological one. While a comprehensive account of these issues is

9 *Ibid.*, 5–6.

beyond the present discussion, the following questions provide an overview of some of the main arguments leveled against progress.¹⁰

How has the notion of progress been used historically? Ideas that appear benevolent are often mobilized to legitimize forms of domination, and the language of progress is no exception. Perhaps the most obvious example of this point comes from the 19th century, when this concept was integrated into the logic of European imperialism. Western societies described themselves as more advanced and claimed a civilizing mission that justified the violent subjugation of other peoples. The notion was also used to promote scientific racism and eugenics, where “progress” was invoked to defend hierarchies that we now recognize as indefensible. It is important to emphasize that these are not accidental misuses of an otherwise virtuous idea. Rather, they reflect an ambivalence that is inherent in the concept itself. That is to say, the internal logic of progress can be, and often has been, aligned with exclusion and domination.

Who is left out of progress? Even when developments that most of us would consider positive occur, they rarely encompass the broader population. Contemporary debates about inequality exemplify this point. While modern societies are marked by significant economic growth, the gains of that growth tend to disproportionately serve a narrow segment of the population, leaving the majority without the benefits that the rhetoric of progress implies. A related dynamic appears on a global scale: Western prosperity has long been intertwined with the extraction of resources from the Global South. In both cases, what is presented as broadly beneficial turns out to be highly limited. Progress implies universality, but in reality, it is selective.

10 For a range of critical perspectives on modernity and progress, see: Chomsky, Noam, and Marv Waterstone. *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance*. London: Penguin Books, 2021; Eisenstadt, Shmuel N., ed. *Multiple Modernities*. New York: Routledge, 2017; Harvey, David. *Kratka zgodovina neoliberalizma*. Trans. Rok Kogej. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 2012; Piketty, Thomas. *A Brief History of Equality*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2022; Rutherford, Adam. *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022; Žižek, Slavoj. *Against Progress: Žižek's Essays*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.

Who is the agent of progress? A common assumption is that progress inherently follows from structural trends, such as technological development, or that it is driven by a small group of elites. However, the historical record complicates this claim. For example, during the first Industrial Revolution, unprecedented technological advances did not immediately improve the living standards of most people, as at least half a century passed before the majority experienced real gains.¹¹ Those gains came only when popular movements challenged the political order and forced a more equitable distribution of wealth. Progress has, therefore, often resulted not from the natural consequences of new technologies or the generosity of elites, but from collective struggles carried out by those with the least power.

Finally, what new problems are brought about by progress? The discourse of progress typically highlights the benefits and minimizes the downsides of new developments. Technology again provides an obvious example. New devices may increase efficiency, but they also generate drawbacks that did not previously exist. The digital revolution, for instance, made us more connected than ever, but also created new forms of dependency, distraction, and psychological harm. From a broader perspective, we can say that modern economic growth has raised general living standards, but that it has also produced an unprecedented environmental catastrophe. In other words, developments celebrated as progress often carry negative side effects that are integral to the very processes that produce their benefits.

All of these aspects are, of course, connected. A concise way of illustrating this point is to consider the arguments presented within the framework of historical materialism, which arguably represents the most powerful critique of progress. A Marxist perspective would emphasize that productivity gains that result from the capitalist mode of production were often used to justify the dispossession of indigenous populations; that the benefits of growth have consistently and disproportionately favored the capi-

¹¹ Allen, Robert C. "Engels' Pause: Technical Change, Capital Accumulation, and Inequality in the British Industrial Revolution." *Explorations in Economic History*, 46/4 (2009), 418–435.

talist class; that improvements in living standards have primarily resulted from worker resistance, not capitalist initiative; and that the incentives that created modern prosperity now undermine an effective response to the ecological crisis. The point, then, is that these issues represent outcomes produced by capitalism's own structure. They are not accidents or external factors but follow from the system's basic dynamics.¹²

PROGRESS IN THIS ISSUE

Debates about progress have received renewed attention over the past two decades. This resurgence can be attributed to the popularity of the so-called "New Optimists," a group of authors who argue that the modern world is significantly better than any earlier historical period.¹³ Steven Pinker, their most prominent advocate, assembles large amounts of quantitative data to argue that modern societies have achieved remarkable improvements in living standards, wealth, democracy, and more. Unsurprisingly, the New Optimist accounts have drawn significant criticism from the aca-

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- 12 For contemporary historical materialist perspectives, see: Brenner, Robert. "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong." In: *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham, 49–111. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Chibber, Vivek. *Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It*. London and New York: Verso, 2022; Krašovec, Primož. *Tujost kapitala*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2021; Rutar, Tibor. *Sodobni zagovor historičnega materializma: sociologija, filozofija, zgodovina*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2016; Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London and New York: Verso, 2017.
- 13 Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Ridley, Matt. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011; Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018.

demic community, with scholars contesting both their empirical claims and general conclusions.¹⁴ The problems of progress are very much still with us.

These problems also form the background of the contributions to this issue. The opening article by Tibor Rutar defends the notion of progress by revisiting and updating several empirical claims made by the New Optimists. Drawing on new cross-national data on violence, inequality, and living standards, Rutar argues that the world of the early 21st century is indeed markedly better than the world of earlier eras. He also suggests that these positive trends are strongly correlated with institutions typically associated with modernity, such as free markets, democratic political systems, and secure property rights. While acknowledging certain complexities, Rutar provides a broadly affirmative case for modern progress.

The rest of the contributions offer a more critical perspective. My own article examines how the concept of progress is treated across different paradigms in the natural and social sciences. It explores how various frameworks understand long-term development, the character of modern institutions, and the significance of class relations. It concludes with a discussion of the political implications of these perspectives, assessing which criticisms of modernity – and especially of capitalism – are warranted. The article thus seeks to provide a nuanced view of how progress is understood in contemporary social science.

Taken together, these first two articles directly address the macro-historical issues of progress from an empirical and a theoretical standpoint. The subsequent contributions engage with the concept of progress through

14 Braumoeller, Bear F. *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; Gray, John. "John Gray: Steven Pinker Is Wrong about Violence and War." *The Guardian*, 13 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining> (access: September 2025); Hickel, Jason. "Progress and Its Discontents." *New Internationalist*, 7 August 2019. <https://newint.org/features/2019/07/01/long-read-progress-and-its-discontents> (access: September 2025); Dwyer, Philip, and Mark Micale, eds. *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

more specific cases, which, from their distinct perspectives, connect back to the broader debates about its ambivalence.

Augusto Petter turns to the 19th century to analyze how the aesthetics of progress was used to legitimize monarchical authority in an age increasingly defined by civilizational comparison. After outlining how progress functioned as a framework of evaluation through which peripheral states were judged by the “civilized” West, Petter examines the foreign travels of Dom Pedro II of Brazil. Through visits to museums, universities, factories, and world exhibitions, this emperor presented an image of a cosmopolitan and progressive monarch. However, beneath these displays of modernity, Brazil remained a slaveholding society, revealing the gap between the appearance of progress and the social realities it upheld.

Julija Šuligoj examines the evolving historical understandings and representations of the female body. Beginning with an overview of feminist perspectives and the long history of female bodily representation, Šuligoj then focuses on sports – and mountaineering in particular – as a productive case study for exploring this topic. The treatment of women mountaineers shows the persistent tension between admiration for their achievements and enduring stereotypes about femininity and physical capability. This case further shows that while the 20th century saw important advances in women’s participation, these gains also generated new forms of scrutiny and bias. The history of the shifting perspectives on the female body thus illustrates how progress in certain respects may simultaneously produce new challenges.

Miroslav Vašík addresses the complexities of historical transitions by analyzing how the neoabsolutist regime in the 1850s governed student reading associations in Prague. Contrary to the view of this period as wholly repressive, Vašík shows that state elites selectively supported certain forms of civic and educational activity in the service of modernization and national integration. Despite censorship, surveillance, and strict oversight, these associations managed to maintain a limited civic presence and contributed to the cultural life of the city. This case demonstrates that political regimes

often combine seemingly contradictory elements, such as modernization and repression, thereby challenging linear narratives of progress or decline.

Finally, Sarah Lias Ceide offers a conceptual history of “technocracy” as a term that reflects ambivalent attitudes toward progress. Far from being a recent invention, the concept gained prominence in the 20th century because of its ability to articulate anxieties about excessive scientific, industrial, and administrative rationalization. Tracing its use across the United States, Germany, and Italy, Ceide shows that even highly authoritarian or reactionary systems, including Fascist and Nazi governments, developed their own narratives of modernization and development. This illustrates that the idea of progress is deeply embedded in Western political imaginaries, as it can be found, at least in certain forms, even in contexts of extreme repression.

In sum, I would argue that the contributions to this issue do not necessarily suggest that the concept of progress should be abandoned altogether. After all, any political project that is not explicitly conservative relies on a forward-looking vision of society – one that includes an idea of where we are, how we arrived here, and what the future should look like. Instead, what these contributions demonstrate is that progress is a complex and multidimensional notion that cannot be reduced to a simple, linear trajectory. Its use demands careful consideration and reflection.

From a broader academic perspective, this issue shows how the question of progress can integrate diverse themes, methodologies, and historical contexts into a common framework. The concept of progress, precisely through its ambivalence and contradictions, remains a productive area of research.

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