Reconstructing an Impartial and Pluralistic Notion of Progress in Contexts of Diversity

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> "I've tried very hard over these years to avoid recrimination and bitterness," he said. "I just think it's not a good look. One of the ways I've dealt with this whole thing is to look forward and not backwards. What happens tomorrow is more important than what happened yesterday."
> *(Salman Rushdie, Interview in New Yorker Magazine, February 6th, 2023)*

1. Introduction: The paradox of progress as an idea[1]

For many contemporary observers, the idea of progress is either dead or politically unsavoury. Many critics rightfully argue that the notion of progress really took off during the modernisation and industrialisation of the Western world and hence involves a severely Eurocentric and dangerously optimistic bias (Allen 2016; Said 1978; Lyotard 1984). Some scholars would add that this bias helped protect the power and privilege first of colonial and then of capitalist exploitation (Latour 1993; Appadurai 2013). If progress has survived as an idea in some cultural contexts, it is often equated with the left/liberal political spectrum, for instance, in the US American sense of progressivism (Nugent 2010). The apparent demise of progress as a legitimate political idea, however, comes with huge costs, costs that eventually outweigh its benefits.

World relations *(Weltbeziehungen)* are always also political relations, and, in recent years, it seems they are once again at their nadir. Not only do we see

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the political tectonics of West versus East re-erupting in violent conflicts, we also see that the dark side of industrialisation and a modern lifestyle is eventually catching up with humanity in the form of climate change and (hu)man-made "natural" catastrophes. *Weltbeziehungen* are always emotional relationships as well and depend on overarching narratives, and even those grand narratives seem to be in crisis (Beyme 1992; Mills, 1959). When those narratives no longer exist, partial narratives mushroom. Let me give two somewhat notorious examples: development and greatness.

For a long time, *development* was an alternative narrative: industrialisation pushed the envelope of material prosperity, especially in European countries and their offspring. This led to the conclusion that other countries had to emulate the developmental path that those countries had taken (Young 1982). This narrative was eminently lopsided and partial, however, in that it usually equated development with economic growth. Where growth was absent, both governments in developing countries and the international agencies for development assistance failed (Easterly 2001; Escobar 2007; Ferguson 1994; Chakrabarty 2009). Where growth was present, it often led to the over-exploitation of natural and human resources (Sachs 1993; Gowdy 1994; Zaid 2009).

The notion of *increasing national greatness* is an even better example of the fact that the alternatives to progress are even less "palatable" than a notion of progress. While the idea of the *gloria* or *greatness* of one's nation plays an important, and not always negative, role in the history of political thought (Price 1977), it is obvious that such a concept of what a country, and a society, should achieve can lead to very dangerous conclusions. It can lead to ideas of supremacy and of looking down on other peoples or nations. It is not a coincidence that such discourses are on the rise in contexts of crisis and self-doubt (Hagström 2021). The absence of progress as an idea also leads political leaders, such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, to look to an imaginary past—a past which glorifies something that never existed and which justifies discourses and policies of antagonisation and enmity (Reshetnikov 2011; Hopf 2002; Barnett 2017).

Given the alternatives, it might be better to follow the path of those who have attempted to reconstruct a notion of progress (Kitcher 2016; Wagner 2018; Mäder 2014). Otherwise, we easily fall into the spell of highly partial notions of the path towards a common goal focusing on specific aims (e.g., growth) or specific targets (our nation). Whether or not "progress" is the best choice remains to be seen, but it has some advantages over other notions. To

name but a few: it does not need to be teleological in the sense of a final state, we can apply it to political decision-making, and it forces people and politicians alike to make normative choices explicitly, rather than hiding them behind some form of technocratic reasoning.

The biggest downside of the idea of progress is, of course, that it does not exist, at least not in a naïve or strong form, such as a Pareto optimal decision rule that would be supported by everyone (Arrow 1951). How can we deal with such a paradox, with progress being both necessary but seemingly impossible (Shabani 2017)? We have to dissect the idea of progress further and see how we can use a plural notion of progress in situations of human diversity.

Diversity, in turn, is arguably the most important fact about humanity. Remarkably, it often leads a surprisingly quiet, unappreciated life for those looking at world history. One example, Charles Fukuyama (2014, 43), defines the human condition in four major dimensions: sociability, cognitive skills for abstract thinking, following norms, and intersubjective recognition. While this list of characteristics is certainly more extensive than simplistic models of human behaviour, it still aims to distil factors that are common to all humanity. One of the defining traits of humanity, however, is that people differ in many respects, e.g., sex/gender, class, and psychological characters. Diversity thus takes many shapes or forms among humans and the ecosystems in which they live. Of course, diversity itself is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. More poignantly, people are diverse in the sense that they do not easily agree on a common notion of progress. Progress can therefore only happen as pluralist decision-making under situations of human diversity and potential disagreement.

This prompts a look at how decision sciences such as economics and hard science have dealt with human diversity, and we find that they have often given diversity short shrift. In order to lead to swift, efficient, and bureaucratically feasible decisions, they have downplayed the role of diversity. Such an efficient version of policymaking has led to accelerating, accumulating, and arguably biased decisions. We thus need to look at the role of decision sciences, and the antidotes that can come from "less rigorous" sciences such as sociology, political science, or anthropology—sciences which usually start with the notion that all humans are different rather than the same.

Once we have understood how progress operates in political decision-making, and once we have peeled from it the cumbersome or even dangerous layers of intellectual history and modern decision science, we will understand that progress as a process requires some form of democratic agree-

ment (Forst 2017). It needs to be pluralist in order to avoid the traps of partiality. This might lead to fewer, slower, truly progressive decisions but hopefully also to less biased ones, and it allows us to focus on the biggest global challenges as a world community, and not fall into the trap of dividing us along lines of partiality.

2. What progress has meant and what it could mean

It would be going too far to recount the history of progress as an idea (see, e.g., Nisbet 1992), yet it is interesting to note that progress in its most optimistic, linear form had its heyday in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of its origins go back to Saint Augustine and, indeed, much further back to ancient Rome and Greece. It is also true that only some notions of progress are truly modern (Bury 1920) while others are not (Edelstein 1967; Fulda and Rosa 2011; Kitcher 2016). Notions of progress also differ in connotations and finalities. For Thucydides, for instance, progress was linked to greatness and allowed the Greek nations to go from barbarism to civilisation (Nisbet 1992, 10). In ancient Greece, progress was also linked to blasphemy, a rebellious act against the gods, most famously narrated in the story of Prometheus who steals fire from the gods and is punished eternally for it. Progress has always been ambivalent and contained a notion of resistance.

In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Saint Augustine looked for ways to reconcile the idea of progress with Christianity. Rather optimistically, he saw (Christian) humanity gradually rising over the centuries (Nisbet 1992, 13; Mommsen 1951). While Augustine's ultimate interest lay in divine providence, his writings reinforced the idea of seeing history as a linear, cumulative process towards reason. The early modern age saw pessimists and optimists debating whether life was in the "state of nature" and how contemporary times related to this. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the main rise of optimism in the work of thinkers such as Turgot or Comte (Bury 1920, 75), but it is important to note that even those thinkers always saw progress as something delicate and a product of contention (Mäder 2014). Progress and modernity find their clearest connection in the *Aufklärung*/Enlightenment (Fulda and Rosa 2011; Koselleck 1989), albeit with foreshadowing sinister undertones about some nations or even "races" being more enlightened than others (Barnouw 1994; Eberl 2019; Bernasconi

2002). Even then, however, philosophers disagreed on what progress was eventually about (Harris 1956).

The triumphalism did not last long, and at the end of the nineteenth century, critical voices such as Nietzsche ridiculed the idea of progress: “progress is just a modern idea, i.e. a wrong idea” (Nietzsche 1888, cited in Mäder 2014, 191). The horrors of the twentieth-century world wars struck a fatal blow to strong, almost eschatological notions of progress. The Enlightenment had proved to be perfectly compatible with the horrors of technocratic genocide (Horkheimer et al. 2022). Other ideas of progress, such as the promise of economic prosperity or liberal democracy lived beyond World War II and became instrumental in the post-war renaissance of modernisation theory (Lipset 1959; Wagner 2018), but even their days were numbered.

It did not take long to finally sink the idea of progress. Western colonialism and imperialism had already revealed the enormous level of hypocrisy (Appadurai 2013; Said 1978), preaching universalist values while delivering imperial domination. The atrocities of colonialism suggested that progress was an occidental, Western concept (see also contribution by Fuchs et al. in this volume). It is true that linear, teleological, and strongly optimist notions of progress were closely related to particular Western ideas—although not all Western thinkers shared such an understanding of progress.

Some non-Western cultures had somewhat similar infatuations with progress and civilisation (Young 1982). For example, famous Arab historians like Ibn Khalun wrote about the rise and decline of societies (see also Nakayama 1997). One difference, perhaps, is that there was no clear-cut division between the religious and secular dimensions of progress in the writings of Eastern political thought (Kemmerling and Parida forthcoming). Nonetheless, this should caution us not to take Eurocentrism to its extreme (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) and think that all types of progress are a Western invention. Non-Europeans clearly “thought” about processes similar to progress even when the content and importance differed from context to context.

Nisbet (1992, 31) summarises his tour de force through the history of progress as follows: “So the idea of progress seems a dead end, but we should not write its obituary yet.” For progress to survive, however, it needs to shed some of its naïve, outright dangerous partiality (e.g., linking it to greatness or any specific religion). Partiality here always means two things: first, the opposite of impartiality as a fundamental norm of governance

(Rothstein 2011, 6), and, second, partial in the sense of highlighting only one dimension or value of progress while neglecting others (e.g., prosperity over sustainability, freedom/autonomy over security/compliance). There is also little chance of any other type of teleology surviving. Progress then can be merely defined as an event or sequence of events—or, perhaps more practically, decisions—that divide before and after (temporal dimension), better or worse (normative dimension), and an agreement about making such decisions (political or symbolic dimension). Perhaps a parallel can be found in Popper's (1957) idea of "piecemeal engineering" (*Stückwerkstechnologie*) or Kitcher's (2016, 167) local progress, i.e., progress which happens in a narrowly defined temporal and spatial context. In other words, we need to "shrink" the notion to insulate it against any form of hubris.

3. Progress and decision-making under human diversity

Hubris is not the only problem of past notions of progress. A more intricate issue perhaps is that progress happens in the context of human diversity. Arguably, the most remarkable fact about human society and its ecologies is its diversity, be it biodiversity, or social, human diversity. As with all anthropological concepts, there is nothing good or bad about it: it is simply a "fact of life." It can be harnessed to great effect but can also divide people, peoples, and people against nature.

Diversity comes in many shapes and forms. Biodiversity is a good example, and so are people living in biodiverse ecosystems. In a social sense, humans differ in their gender identification, in their psychological traits, and in their access to income and power, to name but a few differences (Diamond 1991; Haidt 2012). These dimensions of diversity do not have immediate moral implications. They also cannot be essentialised. They do not have to exist. Some people do not care about their sexual orientation and would never use it as yardstick against which to judge political proposals, for instance. But diversity implies that people can disagree. They are not ants or any other eusocial insect. While some individual ants might be rebellious, such behaviour occurs rarely and is swiftly punished (Wilson 2012, 19). A worker ant is moulded into the division of labour in its colony. Humans, in contrast, can and do rebel as workers, as citizens, and as family members. Their social positions and roles are elastic and can change. This is what

makes eusociality among humans so dynamic (Bowles and Gintis 2011), and with dynamics come new questions for social progress.

While diversity is a fact of life, it constitutes a problem for political decision-making. Some political theorists solve this problem easily by giving all power to one or very few persons, either to a Hobbsian monarch or autocrat, to Plato's philosopher king, or to Leibniz' Panglossian technocrat. Thus, they cut through the Gordian knot of divisiveness.

There is another way to deal with the problem: ignore it. This is the way the science of decision-making often reacts to the nuisance of having to deal with diversity. Unfortunately, the most powerful branches of decision sciences have found ways to achieve this. In economics, for instance, the power of neoclassical thinking lies in assuming away diversity and treating every human being as an identical *homo oeconomicus* (Keen 2010). This has greatly facilitated the computation of rational human behaviour. It allows for decisions but does not often lead to a realistic model of human behaviour. While this is a common critique of neoclassical economics, it also shows why this branch of economics is so successful and hard to expunge. Let me give one example. Gregory Mankiw is perhaps the world's most famous economist. In his textbooks (e.g., Mankiw 2003), he uses stylised macroeconomic models that can explain how, for instance, monetary and fiscal policies affect macroeconomic outcomes such as economic growth or unemployment. But these textbooks rarely and truly engage with diversity. The economic agents that populate the textbook world all look the same. There is no real human diversity when all these books allow for is talking about firms, employees, and governments, for example.

A short scientific paper shows that this is problematic. It contains a simple model with two types of consumers, one "myopic," and one "rational." Here is its conclusion (p. 124):

"A better model would acknowledge the great heterogeneity in consumer behavior that is apparent in the data. The savers-spenders theory sketched here takes a small step toward including this microeconomic heterogeneity in macroeconomic theory, and it yields some new and surprising conclusions about fiscal policy."

The remarkable fact about this paper is its author: Gregory Mankiw (2000). In other words, the author of the scientific article shows that the author of the textbook greatly underestimates the consequences of diversity—or heterogeneity, as economists tend to call it.

As a profession, economics has greatly advanced in recent years, also as a consequence of new sub-disciplines such as behavioural economics and rigorous impact analysis. Yet the crude example of Mankiw's work still highlights an issue: politicians look at decision science to motivate and legitimate their decisions. The clearer, faster, and more powerful such insights are, the better for politicians (and the experts they rely on). There is still a premium for speed and efficiency, even at the cost of realism.

Perhaps the clearest example of bias for action, often with fatalistic undertones (see contribution by Pettenkofer in this volume) comes from management and engineering. In his 2014 book Evgeny Morozov (2014) describes how software engineers and the "tech community" develop a solutionist attitude towards any kind of technical or social problem. Nachtwey and Seidl (2020) show that such a solutionist culture does indeed determine the behaviour of tech elites, but it also trivialises many severe social problems. In the literature on management, it is well known that excessive forms of managerialism create the very problems it supposedly cures (Kuhl 2009; Klikauer 2015).

More ambivalent are legal studies about the role of diversity in human behaviour (and opinions). Perhaps this also makes legal decisions somewhat notorious for being slow and bureaucratic. Nonetheless, modern legal doctrine enshrines the egalitarian concept that people are equal before the law. Of course, there are good reasons why laws should apply universally, and exceptions such as positive discrimination and affirmative action often only serve as exceptions to these rules.

Like behavioural and heterodox forms of economics, recent scholarship in legal studies has emphasised diversity and even plurality, acknowledging the limits of universality (Cubukcu 2017; Glenn 2004; Anghie 2006; Dembour 2012). It is also clear that legal doctrine has a more sophisticated model of individuals, with their freedoms embedded in an organic society (Becker 1996; Hörnle 2015). Legal studies also take more cues from different types of social sciences and humanities (Lüdemann 2006; Funke and Schmolke 2019).

Nonetheless, differences in opinions between legal scholars sit uneasy in the discipline. In many countries there is a *herrschende Lehre/Meinung*, a ruling legal doctrine—to use a somewhat imprecise term (Tuschak 2009; Drosdeck 1989). This is not surprising, given that the legal apparatus has to deal with the pressure and urgency of problems, but this also shows that many legal doctrines not only have a problem with diversity among ordinary people but also among judges and legal experts. Again, this diversity and disagreement

is a nuisance rather than a substantive characteristic of (the) discipline (Epstein et al. 2011; Sunstein et al. 2006).

Economics, management, and the hard sciences—and perhaps to a lesser degree legal studies—stand in remarkable contrast to other sciences such as sociology, political science, anthropology, and philosophy, all of which tend to the other extreme. The latter disciplines think of human beings as extremely diverse, leading to all kinds of social and cultural groups, classes, and milieus. Such differences have consequences: unpredictability, misunderstandings, and the potential for conflict. Critics often accuse these social and human sciences of being failures, of not accumulating knowledge, and of being soft or indecisive (Cassell 2002; Elster 2011)—perhaps rightly so. However, the decision sciences could learn from them that "good" political decisions (whatever "good" means) are arguably rarer, slower, and harder to achieve than powerful decision sciences would imply. Decision sciences that ignore human diversity, make the political wheel turn faster, and they accelerate decision-making to cope with ever-new political issues (Rosa 2022), but they rarely solve them.

4. Pluralistic progress in political decision-making

Political decision-making is always pressed for time. In political and policy science, symptoms include complaints that political systems stagnate if they have too many veto players and too many checks and balances (Tsebelis 2002; Immergut 1990). In the European economic context, economists have called this *Eurosclerosis* (Giersch 1985; Siebert 1997), an institutional form of rigidity that (allegedly) makes countries smother the free interplay of market forces, thereby leading to unemployment and a lack of growth. Rather paradoxically, we also find the opposite claim, namely, that there is too much policy volatility, and that decisions are made only to be reversed a few years later (Kemmerling and Makszin 2018; Doyle 2014; Henisz 2004). Other scholars argue that political decisions overreact, inflate, or "bubble up" (Jones et al. 2014; Maor 2012). Again, there is an opposing claim, namely, that political decisions in some areas underreact (Maor 2014; Howlett and Kemmerling 2017), for instance, against truly complex or *wicked* problems such as climate change.

How can all of these claims be true at the same time? I think they only make sense against the background of a notion of progress as decision-mak-

ing under extreme diversity. Very few political decisions can be rightfully called progress for many, if not most, citizens. In their absence, the decisions accumulate (Adam et al. 2019; Van Engen et al. 2016), making future decisions even more bureaucratic, legalistic, and complicated. They also lead to complaints about politics being deficient in time (Rosa 2022).

What we need, therefore, is, to use a current buzzword, "more mindful" decision-making, taking a step back—a pause—to see what really matters and what does not. This act of stepping back would constitute the kind of *Entschleunigung* or deceleration that Rosa (2021) has argued for. Of course, the legal and political apparatus still needs to churn out urgent decisions. This is not a problem as long as we concede that these are partial solutions and not equivalent to any deeper form of progress. For real progress to occur, people need to accept the basic rationale of a decision. For instance, it is not good enough for a country to adopt liberal political institutions or liberal gender norms if these values are not deeply engrained in a society. Western political thinkers have perhaps counted victory too early (Pinker 2018; Welzel 2013). Some part of the great regression in liberal values and political regimes (V-Dem Institute 2021), has to do with the fact that liberal policies spread rather shallowly, emulating the practices of "Western liberal democracies" rather than really sharing them (Marsh and Sharman 2009; Pritchett et al. 2010).

At first sight, this kind of decelerated decision-making and measuring of progress sounds counterproductive in an age of turbo-charged technological progress and huge impending doomsday scenarios of climate change and nuclear war. In the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson had already written: "I am forced to be a progressive, because society itself changes" (Wilson 1913). In this sense, deceleration would mean status quo bias and structural conservatism. It would become partial again, leaning towards a politically conservative side. The contradiction dissolves, however, once we reflect more deeply that non-decisions are also political decisions (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). They are decisions not to make decisions. In this regard, policymakers constantly make (non-)decisions not to regulate the dark space of the internet more heavily or not to fight climate change more thoroughly—to give but two examples. A more reflective and decelerated approach to decision-making also implies taking such non-decisions seriously and weighing their importance against the everyday humdrum of bureaucratic incrementalism (Hayes 2017).

This is where we need to resurrect a notion of impartial progress that is suitable for everyone. *Weltbeziehung* also mean finding a common emotional

and rational ground on which to make common decisions. Such common ground can only be achieved by some form of common understanding and a common "democratic" process of deliberation. The common ground is necessary since it needs to mend what is necessarily broken by making a decision. In Niklas Luhmann's ([1994] 2019, 259) words, every decision has a diabolic component: it divides; it forces us to draw a distinction and choose one side of the distinction— government vs. opposition, right vs wrong, good vs bad. However, in the same way that losing a vote in a democracy does not mean losing all political rights, decisions also require a symbolic dimension—something we can all agree on, regardless of whether we disagree on the specific issue at hand or not.

This symbolic dimension thus transcends the decision itself and requires some kind of common interpretation of the context in which the decision arises (Luhmann 2002, 274) and some form of resonance (see introduction to this volume). It allows people to form an understanding of what progress might mean in basic terms in a world society. It would not mean that we construct a common Elysium, Nirvana, or Heaven but that we find a way of interacting with each other that leads to a common understanding about how to come to better and impartial decisions. Impartiality is crucial because it works like an umpire in sports: people come together with diverse, sometimes rival goals. Impartial progress means that the process still leads to fair results. In this way, progress is at least as much about how decisions are generated as it is about desirable outcomes. It is a political concept in the true sense.

Such a worldview would not only contain ideas about a common global governance structure but also some fundamental policy contents, such as the need to achieve a more equitable and sustainable planet. While it would be somewhat self-defeating for me, as a single, potentially partial and thereby biased author, to claim that specific human inventions are clear examples of progress, many people would intuitively agree on some "telltale" achievements across history. The modern welfare state is a good example. One can certainly discuss whether the modern welfare state has grown excessively or whether it devours too much money, but it is also clear that the basic institution of a welfare state has progressively addressed a clear modern problem of risk sharing and social assistance. The symbolic dimension of progress involves appreciating, or even celebrating, such general achievements and how they came about, without forgetting their problems.

Another example of social progress that comes to mind is the peaceful coexistence of religions. For instance, the edicts of toleration from the late sixteenth century onwards symbolise—despite all the backlashes that followed in the Thirty Years' War—a gradual pacification between the Protestant and Catholic religions in Europe. Progress is thus related to another fundamental value: tolerance, and the capacity to endure pain. Decisions always create pain for the decision-maker, but especially for those who do not support the outcome. Toleration is the process of accepting such outcomes without reacting too strongly (e.g., violently) against it (Heywood 1999; Forst 2020). In such a sense, tolerance is also a fundamental value of a functioning democracy if democracy is defined as a system in which governments (can) lose elections peacefully (Przeworski 1999).

But tolerance also works on another level: it is the basic insight that people are different and a basic respect for such differences. In this second sense, tolerance cannot be unilateral, it needs to be mutual in any direction. The toleration of intolerant acts would not work, and neither would an intolerance of tolerant acts. True progress thus only happens if decisions become—at the minimum—tolerable in such a sense for everyone. This would not require agreement but an acceptance of the basic shared insights of progress. This sounds like too little for many observers: we should strive for mutual recognition instead of toleration. To others, even a notion of toleration sounds utopian or naïve. Progress based on minimal notions of toleration, impartiality, and pluralism as a least common denominator, however, might still be preferable to discarding the idea of progress altogether.

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