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Précis: Progress and Regression

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Abstract: This paper challenges both simplistic optimism and categorical rejection of the concept of progress. It argues that while historical and technological advancements – such as antibiotics or digital communication – are undeniable, they do not automatically equate to moral or social progress. Progress is not a linear or teleological unfolding of pre-defined goals but a normatively charged, processual concept rooted in problem-solving and experiential learning. The paper thus proposes a materialist and pragmatic understanding of social change, where forms of life evolve through crisis-driven responses to second-order problems – failures not just in addressing immediate needs, but in the systems meant to solve them. Progress, then, is a qualitative transformation that reflects not just adaptation, but learning how to learn – an accumulative, reflexive process that may or may not occur. Regression, by contrast, marks blocked or reversed learning, a breakdown in such problem-solving capacity. Ultimately, the paper offers a pluralist and non-essentialist theory of progress, preserving its critical and normative potential while rejecting deterministic or ethnocentric narratives. The approach repositions progress as a dynamic, reflective category necessary for critical social theory.

Keywords: progress; learning process; critical theory; Rahel Jaeggi; John Dewey

1 The Progress Narrative

That progress exists is hard to deny. Until the discovery of penicillin in 1928, people could die from – by today's standards – harmless infections.[1] In the Middle Ages, scriptures were copied by hand, a time-consuming process. The invention of letterpress printing spurred immensely the proliferation of written texts. Today, my laptop's computing power easily exceeds what was available for the Apollo 11's Guidance Computer from 1969. And only a few decades ago, you needed to have

1 Following a first subsidence of perceived threat from infections and viral diseases in the countries of the global North post-World War II, the rise of HIV in the 1980s and the recent Corona pandemic have, in different ways, made the vulnerability of life and social structures present again.

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change on hand and wait in line at phone booths just to quickly call someone. Today, we are in touch with the whole world at all times, and my son finds it hard to imagine a social life without smartphones. He also has trouble imagining a time when women were not allowed to vote, children were legally beaten at school and at home, and homosexuality was a punishable offense.[2]

That there is progress in some areas or some respects, even if it might, in Nestroy's (2000, 91) words, sometimes 'look greater than it actually is,' is thus a triviality. The less trivial questions are why and in what respect the developments I mentioned are not just changes in general but *changes for the better*, what and who brings them about, and whether and how the various developments are interrelated. Is there progress? In some sense, then, this is a misguided question. However, whether something that corresponds to a 'strong notion of progress' exists, and whether the many small or local advances lead to progress in a comprehensive sense is up for debate.[3]

But then: Progress is not simply 'out there'. Progress is a normatively charged interpretive pattern, a narrative that serves to establish a particular conception of social and historical processes (Koselleck 2006a, 45–8; 2006b, 66–70; 2006c, 2006d). When we speak of progress, we don't refer to bare events, to brute facts, but to our understanding of them, our evaluation of what has happened, and our expectations for what is to come. We conceive of something *as* progress and thus relate historical and social events to each other, thus constructing a process which we evaluate and claim to understand.

It is very well possible then that there is no state in world history in which things do not, *in fact*, change for the better or worse. However, not all of these changes are perceived *as* progress or regression.

So what does it mean to understand social change as progress, or, respectively, regress? How can the concept of progress *help us* understand, as Wendy Brown (2001, 3) phrases it, "where we have come from and where we are going", if going means towards things like emancipation – or at least away from the multi-layered

2 It is helpful (also to curb an overly hasty skepticism of progress) to realize that the developments mentioned, with corresponding local differences, are among the achievements of recent and most recent history: As is well known, women's suffrage has existed in Germany for exactly 100 years, in my country of birth, Switzerland, even only since the mid-1970s; the right to non-violent upbringing was not explicitly enshrined in law in Germany until 2000; § 175, according to which homosexuality is 'against the moral law,' was valid in Germany until 1969, or in a modified form until 1994. In the ICD-9 catalog of the WHO homosexuality was listed as a disease until 1992. I limit myself in my enumeration – in the sense of the primacy of self-criticism – to Europe; but as is well known, it does not look better elsewhere in the world, to say the least.

3 An expression borrowed from Wagner 2018, 28.

crisis we currently find ourselves in? And does, maybe, the concept of progress itself – instead of enabling us – *prevent us* from understanding this?

It seems the concept of progress can only be defended if it can be reconstructed and understood in light of its most valid critique. Such a preserving or rescuing critique must first address the implications and political-philosophical semantics of the concept and identify those elements that are in need for reconstruction. But it also has to present an alternative conceptualization of 'progress', one that does not fall into the trap of a developmentalist and ethnocentric self-congratulating *whig history*.

2 Defending Progress

In the following, I would like to briefly outline why we cannot stop at the critique of the concept of progress and *what we lose* if we give up altogether the notions of progress and regression or of progressive or regressive social change. I will take my starting point from those features of the progress narrative that have been increasingly under attack.

First: The euphoric assumption of a solid connection between technical, social, moral, legal, and political progress that has inspired hopes of progress for so long, the assumption that, as Steven Lukes (2010, 8, italics added) has it, "the growth of the economy, of theoretical as well as practical scientific knowledge, and an increase in justice, virtue, and happiness – all this hung together *as if* connected by *an unbreakable chain*" has considerably lost plausibility today. Few still believe that digitalization or genetic engineering will lead directly and by themselves to moral or social improvements. Indeed, there is a valid argument that the discovery of penicillin, or the invention of the washing machine or the printing press, did not, at least not per se, lead to improved social or moral conditions. After all, it did not follow from the mere discovery of penicillin that everybody would be guaranteed its access. Walter Benjamin (1980, 699/thesis XI) already warned not to lose sight of the fact that "the progress in the mastery of nature" can also lead to "the regress of society."

But even if one thing, such as political-moral progress, does not directly and causally follow from another, for example, technical-scientific progress, the reverse notion that both are completely independent of each other is equally unconvincing. If we don't take the obvious connections between the different changes in our forms of life into account, then we fail to recognize what I would like to call the *materiality of forms of life*. The reduction in child mortality due to scientific and technological progress has clearly been a factor increasing intimacy within family

relationships in the bourgeois era.[4] The printing press enabled the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere that functions as a prerequisite for modern democracies and so on (Habermas 1979). It is unlikely that the revolution in information technology, which not only transforms communication but also significantly reshapes our life and work relationships, would have no impact on the social, moral, and political order. Altered living conditions bring about changed social practices, leading to new forms of coexistence and its normative organization. Therefore, the conditions of social change should not be understood all too 'idealistically'. It is one of the key aspects of my project then to reclaim a 'materialistic element' in what drives and motivates progress against idealistic, voluntaristic, and normativist limitations.[5]

Secondly: If, as Koselleck (2006d, 159) describes it, progress in its heyday was regarded as possessing a supra-individual and irresistible force, accepted with an almost fatalistic attitude, the assumed inevitability of progress has equally lost its persuasive power.[6] In fact, many feel this irresistibility in the form of an unstoppable compulsion to grow has more of an impending doom than a promise. The idea of progress as a quasi-automatic historical movement, an evolutionary destiny independent of the will and volition of its actors, not only seems outdated but has thoroughly discredited the concept of progress. "If we have been living in a fools' paradise," John Dewey (1916, 311) wrote as early as 1916, "in a dream of automatic, uninterrupted progress, it is well to be awakened." Today, we think of progress as the result of action. It does not happen by itself but must be fought for. It is not irresistible but, on the contrary, beset by resistance and, in any historical constellation, more improbable than probable. Nowadays, faith in the automatic nature of progress exists almost only as a straw man fallacy, and trust in a supra-personal logic of history has long been replaced by the idea of contingency and a voluntaristic trust in the will and choices of individual actors.

4 Ariès 1976 discusses the transformation of family relationships and the emergence of the female 'interior'; see also Bock 2000; Bock 1977 also wrote one of the important first texts on the domestic work debate in Germany.

5 Among the few authors today who are still explicitly interested in social progress in an integrative sense are Dath and Kirchner 2012, when they define social progress as the "gain in freedom, participation, livelihood for more and more people associated with increases in knowledge and productivity, and the simultaneous elimination of exclusion, oppression, exploitation." Brunkhorst 2014 also adheres to a materialist side when he conceptualizes his reflections on the rights revolutions in terms of the connection between adaptation as conceived in systems theory and normative exploitation.

6 Koselleck's example of how fathers slapped their children's faces as an act of confirmation, which they no longer do, shows that progress is implemented even without a comprehension of further reasons.

But then: The abandonment of the idea of progress is in danger of bringing about a *deficit in social theory* that is especially alarming for a critical theory. While it is easy to discredit the notion of automatism or a transpersonal subject of action, it is much more challenging to find a suitable interpretation of what unfolds in the interplay between events and structure, between the structural prerequisites of action and the action itself.

Indeed, the answer to the question, 'Who brings about social progress and how?' is not straightforward. Social actors do drive change through their beliefs and actions. There is no fate, nor a power that guides the world without the intervention of these actors. However, changes in society don't simply result from individuals changing their opinions and then adjusting their actions accordingly. And while it's correct to rely on social movements for social change, even these movements succeed not solely due to their courage and determination, but also because of other factors. Marx's insight that social revolutions have both active and passive elements applies here: They encounter preconditions, structures, historical opportunities, and are often triggered by crises and weaknesses in the existing system – they must react to these conditions in order to act effectively.

Finally, the notion of a developmental logic – which is commonly attributed to Hegel's philosophy of history – seems to determine whether the motif of progress is still tenable at all for today's critical enterprises. After all, a maturation model in which the various, locally different developments are unified, subsumed, and reduced to a single evolutionary scheme of world-historical movement leads to an intolerable hierarchization of the individual stages or developments. If progress proceeds according to a fixed plan and a binding pattern, those who do not conform to it are automatically labeled as backward. They are – and that is the core of every theory of universal development – not just different, but not yet where they should be. Those who do not follow the developmental pattern of the so-called 'Western' societies remain, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 8) puts it into a powerful metaphor, in the "waiting room of history". In this way, colonial relations of violence and exploitation are paternalistically justified, and the 'yet-to-be-developed' are led to their supposed happiness by domination, violence, and oppression.

But how is one supposed to think about societies in critical-analytical terms without developing a narrative of some sort that can grasp their transformations as crises, erosions, revolutions, and processes of change? It seems that, despite all the problems related to Hegelian-style philosophies of history: *no philosophy of history* might not be a solution either. As Adorno, in his ambivalence towards the philosophy of history puts it: If we do not want to limit ourselves to the factual state of the world, we can't do *with it* nor can we do *without it.*

And while it is crucial not to approach the various temporalities and differences in local developments from the flattening and ideological universalist

perspective of a universal history, we cannot afford pure localism and contextualism, either, especially when we consider that, as Marx suggested, "the world market is the world spirit" – that is, when we consider the effective global historical entanglements and interdependencies.[7]

Perhaps it is surprising that I have not yet discussed the *normative significance of progress* when addressing the question, 'What is missing when we abandon the concept of progress?' After all, many authors answer that question by pointing out that we would lack a normative guiding principle capable of directing our actions. But the decisive point here is not that we would lose *any* kind of normative standard. What we lose is the specific kind of what one might call a non-foundational foundation of normativity – normativity as it is conceived of in the left-Hegelian tradition of critical theory. What we lose is an *analytical, explanatory and evaluative category*. The question of progress, as Yves Winter (Allen et al. 2018) aptly puts it, is not primarily, and not exclusively, a normative question, but above all a social theoretical and socio-philosophical one. Here I embrace a notion that is not likely to be embraced by many today. Progress then is *neither a fact nor an ideal*, to evoke Amy Allen's (2016) distinction. It is, to put it in Marx's words, the 'real movement' of history.[8] However, in a Hegelian sense, 'reality', does not only refer to what actually and empirically exists but rather to that which, in its contradictions and crisis-ridden nature, has the potential to overcome what exists. In this sense, the criterion of progress always accomplishes both: a comprehensive understanding of the existing and a critique that goes beyond it. With Adorno (2005, 148) again:

> The concept of progress is philosophical in that it articulates the movement of society while at the same time contradicting it. Having arisen societally, the concept of progress requires a critical confrontation with real society.

But how can we develop an understanding of progressive social change that takes the critique of progress into account, but still fulfills its tasks?

The solution I propose is based on two conceptual points of departure.

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7 In this regard, Marx 1984, 37 says in *The German Ideology*: "In the history so far, however, it is just as much an empirical fact that the single individuals, with the extension of the activity to the world-historical, have been more and more enslaved under a power alien to them (which they then also imagined as the harassment of the so-called world spirit, etc.). (which pressure they then also imagined to be the chicanery of the so-called world spirit, etc.), a power which has become more and more mass-like and which in the last instance proves to be the world market."

8 In this respect Marx 1984, 35 writes: "Communism is not for us a state which is to be established, an ideal according to which reality [will have to] be directed. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present condition."

3 Conceptualizing Progress as Process

First and foremost, I do not understand progress in substantial or essentialist sense, but rather processual, as it were, as a process. Progress, in this sense, does not consist of achieving a specific and predetermined state or realizing a particular and pre-determinable good. Instead, progress is a mode, a way in which social change occurs, or conversely, in the case of regression, does not occur. Progress, as I see it, is an accumulative process of problem-solving, of overcoming crises and contradictions, while regression is its counterpart: a systematically blocked process of experience or learning. Understood as a processual concept progress denotes the quality of a development, a process of learning and experience, and thus a particular way in which social transformations take place. To put it differently: the distinction between progressive and regressive modes of social change is made by focusing on the *how* instead of the *what*; on *how* things change and how it is brought about (or isn't) instead of judging the results, the effects, the goals.

Two consequences derive from this understanding:

The *first* is that progress is a normative concept *sui generis*. Even if we associate it with it a change for the better, progress is not dependent on a presupposed, already given understanding of the good or the right. On the contrary, the concept of progress itself contributes something to the determination of what is good or better.

Thus, while within a deontological framework, the concept of progress is not normative in its own right, according to my understanding, it has a foundational normative character: it entails a normative evaluation in and off itself. Progress is a normative concept *sui generis*, in its own right – and it is so as an *ethically thick* processual concept in which description and evaluation are indissolubly connected.[9] In this sense, 'progress' or 'progressive' is a descriptive evaluation and an evaluative description; one would be meaningless without the other. The concept of progress shares this with concepts such as alienation, exploitation, cruelty, or kitsch, i.e., with those thick (ethical) concepts that can be said to constitute the texture of a social world that is always already normatively composed and evaluatively colored.[10]

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9 On the understanding of such 'thick concepts,' see, among others, Williams 1985, 143. On the debate about the metaethical consequences of the assumption of value-laden facts, see, among others, Putnam 2001. On the interpenetration of analytical and descriptive elements as part of an immanent-critical approach, see also Jaeggi 2009, 281-3) and Jaeggi and Celikates 2017, 17–20.

10 From this point of view, a norm-free, neutral description of the social world, to which the evaluation is then added only afterwards, is not plausible. For the description of processes of change *as progress,* it seems to me particularly evident that it derives its conceptual richness, its density and power of development from the fact that it is evaluatively colored without coinciding

The *second consequence* is what one might call the *primacy of progress over the good*. If a widely held conception of progress suggests that its diagnosis depends on a (prior) determination of its objective, this view is not without alternatives. While deontological as well as utilitarian and (in a narrow sense) teleological notions of progress seem to assume that the good can be determined independently of progress, or that we already have know what the good is when we talk about progress my conception reverses the priority. This reversion is bound up with another move that Philip Kitcher (2014, 2021) has defended: We should understand progress less as a movement *towards* a goal than *away from* a problem.

Whether I am following the right path on a hike or have lost my way can only be decided if I know where I am going. I then progressively approach the mountain summit – or not. On my way from the valley station to the summit, the sections t1, t2 and t3 are accordingly stage finishes on my journey to the summit, and the progress I make is measured by the decrease in my distance from it.

This is how some people imagine progress. And of course, there are cases in which this assumption of a goal is at first glance very plausible and quite unproblematic: Obviously, I can set myself goals in relation to which I define progress. If I set out to reach the summit, then every kilometer hiked in its direction is progress toward that goal. My running app notes every kilometer I have done in a section titled 'progress' and adds it to the weekly goal set by me (or by the app itself?).

In the case of scientific-technical progress, it is obvious that the metaphor of hiking trails, mountain peaks, and encouragement apps is misleading. The person who developed the first punch card systems did not already have the idea of a laptop or a modern large-scale computer system in mind, the inventor of the telephone did not think about today's smartphone. As undoubtedly as the invention of the wheel appears in retrospect as an indispensable step on the way to the racing car, it was not guided by the pursuit of the already-known goal of modern racing. The path from eating raw meat to the sous-vide method of upscale cooking or that from the cave to the skyscraper was equally followed without a defined endpoint.

These processes can be understood much better if they are looked at as (progressive) solutions to problems that develop from one another and are driven by new problems arising.

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with the – poorer, normative – evaluation of something as good. Interestingly, otherwise very different philosophical positions converge in an effort to break the dominance of an empiricist worldview based on the assumption of a normatively neutral world. See Crary 2016, 10–35, and on the convergence of these positions with the anti-positivism of Critical Theory, see also Crary 2018.

Clean drinking water was scarce in the European Middle Ages, so beer was brewed.[11] To solve certain problems, including those related to warfare, people were dependent on processing large amounts of data, so they worked on compressing or increasing storage capacity and improving processors, without knowing where it would end. Technical and scientific progress therefore moves from problem to problem, and from solution to solution. It is driven by situations in which one wants or needs to improve something, in which the opportunity to do so arises and in which, if necessary, someone has an idea for solving the problem that proves to be productive and feasible.

This is no different, at least according to my thesis, in the case of social progress, even if 'problems' and 'crises' are of a different order. Social progress, too, results from the occurrence of problems and the processes of searching for and finding a solution, which then again gives rise to new problems and, if things go well, new solutions. Here, too, the final objective is not known from the outset (or, strictly speaking, there is no final one). Social progress is then not attracted or guided by a destination it is supposed to reach but driven by problems and problem-solving: progress away from the bad toward the better, without the latter being pre-determined or final, and without a predictable end. In the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (2001, 19): "A path is developed when one walks."[12]

But then: If progress is more problem-driven than goal-oriented, then there is also no independent good that dictates its direction in the first place and thus turns change into progress. And it seems that this independent good is no longer needed. The relationship of the good to progress can now be basically reversed: It is not that we only understand what progress is when we understand the good; *we understand what the good is once we understand progress*. The notion of progress has priority over the notion of the good. As, again, Kitcher (2014, 210) puts it: "Ethical progress is prior to ethical truth, and truth is what you get by making progressive steps."

Perhaps asking 'What is progress?' as a question about progress as a noun then is not properly posed at all. It might be better understood as an inquiry on the possibility of *progressive transformation*, about progressive social change, that is, about progress in an adjectival sense. What interests us in this context is then less the result, the good achieved, than the progressive transitions from one (social) state to another. It is the progressive process itself that matters.

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11 In Korea, the same problem was met by making soups, which makes it clear that there can be different solutions, functional equivalents to solve a problem, for the same problem. Thanks to Josefine Berkholz for this reference.

12 In the original: "Caminante, no hay camino/se hace camino al andar./Al andar se hace el camino."

Progress is then associated with the idea of learning, or accumulating experience. Suppose I woke up in the morning and could suddenly fly. Even if being able to fly was one of my long-cherished desires, it would be strange to say that I had made unexpected progress overnight in regard to my flying skills. This is because I would hardly have learned to fly overnight. But such unrelated and unexpected changes are not only unlikely, both in terms of individual fortunes (and capacities) as well as in terms of social transformations. This idea of suddenness contrasts with what is meant by the claim that progress or progressiveness is not absorbed in the evaluation of an effect: Progress has a temporal dimension. As a dynamic concept, it is a "process that occurs over a period of time" (Laudan 1978, 5). And more than that: this time span is not "homogeneous and empty", not simply a line that leads from one point to another (Benjamin 1980, 701/thesis XIV). Something must happen that allows these points or elements to relate to each other, emerge from one another, and, in the best case, accumulate into an experience.

Progressive change then is a particular kind of change, namely one that can be described as an accumulative process of learning or experience. The other way around: Regression occurs when this process goes wrong or is blocked. Regressive change is characterized by effects of unlearning and reactive closure to experience.

Progress is change for the better. But that alone is not enough. In the search for a conception that is neither teleological nor deontological, and in which progress itself has a normative meaning, it has turned out that progress is not dependent on an already set objective. The burden of justification now lies on describing this problem-solving process in a way that allows us to evaluate the quality of the problem-solving itself.

Such a process resembles the movement described in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the course of what Hegel describes as an experiential process (*einen Erfahrungsprozess*), where consciousness changes both along with the object and the understanding that consciousness has of itself, this change is not an unconnected, abrupt alteration of the object or a plain refutation of it. It involves an expanded understanding of one's situation and self, the dissolution of self-deception and one-sidedness, guiding this experiential process. The situation is redefined and overcome with reference to a more comprehensive context in which it is embedded or with reference to the deficiencies of the previous description. The new, the progression, the advanced situation, is the result of a practical meta-reflection on what previously existed and of its processing. Progress is not simply about making things better, but about making them more comprehensive in a reflective sense. It involves an increase in experiential complexity, while regression means a loss of complexity and the process of falling below a certain level of reflexivity.

The history of experience that emerges here, can also be described with Dewey: crises generate reflexivity that opens up new courses of action.

This process of enrichment or accumulation (*Anreicherung*) thus should not be imagined as linear. It is mediated through crises and their resolution, in which the respective (social) formations are always at risk of perishing before they transform. Accumulation should also not be conceived quantitatively. An accumulative process, in this dialectical sense, always involves a qualitative change. (It is not like filling steadily a glass; it's the glass itself that changes in the process.) This leads me to my second point of departure, the attempt to retrieve what one might call a materialistic component of the progress narrative.

4 Progress as Transformation of Forms of Life and Second-Order Problem Solving

In order to do this one must redefine the *scope of progress.* Wherever we experience progress, it is forms of life that change. The practices at work in this are interrelated in complex, albeit sometimes only loose ways; they influence each other reciprocally or are made possible by the same overarching developments. Progress is thus conceivable as a complex, mutual interaction of multiply interconnected ensembles of practices, they influence each other reciprocally or are made possible by the same overarching developments. Even if these elements do not come together to form an unbreakable chain, we will still encounter fragile, yet effective connections.

Now, according to my thesis, forms of life, understood as inert ensembles of social practices, solve problems. Not just bare problems as such but problems of a certain kind, problems that are already normatively imbued and historically situated. Forms of life are embodied reactions to problems, attempts to solve these that arise *for* them and *with* them.

This is the basis for understanding their dynamics and the conditions of their change. If, they change when faced with new problematic situations, erosion phenomena, tendencies of decay, or crises in their existing social practices and institutions, which they have partially co-produced.

How, then, do forms of life solve problems? They do so by organizing our lives and providing the patterns of action and the institutions in which we live. They are expressions of a state of problems specific to them, something like the current state of a specific problem-solving process that must be understood as never-ending. If we understand forms of life as problem-solving entities, we begin in the middle, meaning in a world already structured by practices and the problems that arise from them – amid a problem-solving process. In other words, people live and shape the material and immaterial (cultural and symbolic) conditions of their lives.

Problems repeatedly arise, rarely with definitive solutions. And the more complex the situation, the less likely it can be resolved without creating new problems, as solutions typically generate new problems. A crisis driven dynamics.

Now, the problems that forms of life, as forms of life, typically deal with, and in relation to which the question of progress can be raised, have a specific form: they are typically *second-order problems*. These are problems related to the conceptual and cultural resources available to a form of life to solve first-order problems. For example, consider an agrarian society that is struck by a famine because it hasn't rained in months. The shortage of food is, clearly, a first-order problem for the reproduction of this society: people are starving. A second-order problem arises when it turns out that, for some reason, the society is unable to respond to this first-order problem with appropriate measures. Second-order problems do not concern the immediate scarcity (the first-order problem) but rather the practices and institutions, i.e., the social resources that make it possible (or impossible) to respond to it. If, for example, droughts are a regular occurrence, and the society still fails to react with appropriate measures, such as building storage facilities, then this inability to respond, the learning blockage, and structural hindrances that hinder a rational engagement with the problem are second-order problem. (In this regard, the governor of Utah calling for people to pray against the human-induced drying of the Colorado River in 2022 can be understood as a second-order problem.).

If second-order problems or crises solidify, it is always an indication that established institutions, practices, beliefs, and self-conceptions have become questionable and dysfunctional. And since the perception of a problem – to even conceive of something as a problem or crisis – is already shaped by the normative expectations that come from and are addressed to a social order, forms of life are caught in crises due to normatively pre-defined descriptions.

So, if forms of life are problem-solving entities in this sense, they change when they are confronted with new problems or crises, which they, as Thomas Kuhn put it, have partly co-produced. Crises and phenomena of social erosion – problems – in a social order can have very different causes. There are cases where external pressure or the confrontation with new circumstances, new technological developments, or other social forms of life plunge social formations into crisis – all the while having no material, social, or moral resources to meet or overcome these challenges. Social practices and institutions can also run into difficulties or erode due to immanent contradictions. Entire social orders can become dysfunctional and lose legitimacy, potentially leading to spontaneous conflicts.

For the question of progress, the following point is crucial: Social Progress or regression does not occur with respect to solving first order problems; it occurs on the level of second order problems, where forms of life are confronted with

second-order problems and can either cope with them (progress) or cannot (regression).

If forms of life are involved in a problem-solving dynamic whether they are progressive or not is not determined by whether they simply solve the problems that trigger their development, but whether possess the institutional resources and potential to initiate processes of reflection necessary to solve second-order problems. The question is not whether they actually – sometimes or frequently – solve problems, and not even just whether they – sometimes or frequently – learn. The question is whether they have learned to learn.

Problem-solving is then not successful simply when what was dysfunctional is made functional again. If that were the case, regressive problem-solving could, at least at first glance, also be adequate. But a successful problem-solving process is not only a readjustment and reintegration of practices that have become meaningless or problematic into a somehow functioning new set of practices. It is a transformation of the *mode of learning* itself, informed by crises and enabling, or rather compelling, new experiences. Some of these transformations are continuous with the previous state; others cannot happen without radical or revolutionary change. Enrichment, growth, and a successful process of experience, then, are processual ciphers for what lies behind the idea of progress. And again: Accumulation (*Anreicherung*) itself provides the standard for the sought-after criteria of progressive development.

If there are quite different problems that have to be solved within a social form of life – technical problems, problems of knowledge, problems of living together, political or social problems –, then the connection and the appropriate relationship between the different dimensions of progress can be grasped on the level of second-order problem-solving potentials. Solving problems with technological advances, for example, is of no use if it cannot be thought together and made commensurable with the other dimensions of the social, the effects on social life and possible side effects. Solutions to economic problems – like the logic of exploitation – can come into opposition with possibilities of solutions to social problems. On the level of second-order problems, however, these are not separate dimensions. Progress in the development of productive forces that 'does not go well' (to quote Walter Benjamin's formulation once again) for individuals, but also not for the world, is simply not progress. Progress thus becomes a meta-category of social change; change within change. The question of whether a social change is progressive or regressive is then decided not least by the integration of precisely those moments.

5 Conclusions

I presented you with a processual alternative to a conception of progress with substantively determined goals. It argues that moral progress can be understood only in the context of a broader dynamic of social change, against the backdrop of normative and non-normative practices. Social change, in turn, arises as a reaction to crises and contradictions – that is, to mounting pressure from an unresolved problem. What emerges is a non-teleological, pragmatist-materialist, pluralist concept of progress.

My understanding of progress as a (dialectically) self-enriching, problem-solving process has two consequences that address the critique of progress I mentioned in the beginning.

First, an experiential learning and problem-solving process of the type I have described is not a teleological developmental process; it does not reflect the unfurling of some innate potential, nor does it trace a trajectory toward an established goal. Instead, it lurches from one problem (in normal circumstances) or crisis (in times of accelerated change) to the next, with nothing decided in advance and no preordained end in sight.

Second, because the characterization of specific social transformation processes as progressive or regressive bears no substantive relation to any particular content or evolutionary stage – but only to the mode in which change is enacted – my concept of progress as a self-enriching, problem-solving process enables us to think of a multiplicity of developmental learning processes.

Thus, a theory of crisis-driven social change as an experiential learning process breaks with a Eurocentric-paternalist narrative of development. To be sure, it still implies a normative direction: things will change not only within a given sequence of transformative processes, but also for the better (or the worse, if society regresses). This does not imply, however, that we are dealing with a single, all-encompassing world-historical process with pioneers and stragglers, vanguard parties and left-behinds. In short, the fact that we can diachronically diagnose progressive or regressive processes in terms of such a problem-solving dynamic (for example, modern Europe's regression into fascism) does not automatically mean that these would be synchronically comparable. Progress is thereby pluralized. Nonetheless, the diagnosis of progress does not remain bound to a local context, since criteria for the quality of this development that transcend context can still be applied. We are then faced with a multiplicity of paths, not one but possibly many progressive or regressive path to social change.

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