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John Lundy

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Section 1: Paper 3
The Myth of Progress? Critical Theory and the
Debate Over Progress

John Lundy

Abstract: Philosophy as a discipline has generally claimed that human beings have a capacity called practical reason that allows us to address moral-practical questions. Applied to historical change, this yields an account of progress as a process of rationalization. The 20th century has produced a long line of radical critiques of this idea of progress. My central aim is to defend contemporary critical theory's reliance on the idea of progress as an emancipatory process of rationalization. Because she engages deeply and directly with the accounts of progress I seek to defend, my focus is on Amy Allen's critique and an array of closely allied recent criticism. I address Allen's two general objections to progress as a fact, one political and the other epistemological. Against contemporary critical theory, I maintain, neither objection gains traction, since no truly emancipatory project can succeed once the idea of progress has been abandoned, both as a goal and a fact about our past.

Applied to historical change, the idea that practical reason allows us to address moral-practical questions has tended to yield an account of progress as a process of rationalization. Since the early twentieth century, a widening spectrum of radical critiques has sought to expose this notion of progress as a myth.¹ Here, my central aim is to defend contemporary critical theory's reliance on the idea of progress as an emancipatory process of rationalization. Because she engages directly with the family of normative accounts I seek to defend, my main focus is Amy Allen's recent critique.² Because Allen's arguments are representative of some of the leading critiques of progress today, the arguments I develop apply to an array of closely allied recent criticisms.

1. Progress As Myth

As Allen notes, James Tully is quite right to say that, for most people in the world, "the language of progress and development is the language of domination and oppression."³ Given the overwhelming catastrophe that is the dominant notion of progress, it hardly seems possible not to find sympathy with the desire to terminologically distance

a genuinely progressive discourse from the dominant language of these mainstream accounts.

While I am in complete agreement with much of the substantive arguments against dominant accounts of what constitutes development, the strategy of abandoning the language of progress and development is a mistake. First, it is a conceptual mistake, as it creates confusion and ambiguity by conflating alternative accounts of desirable change—on the basis of which dominant ideologies are criticized—with more totalizing critiques that find something wrong with the very idea that there is such thing as desirable change in the first place. Secondly, it is a strategic mistake. By retreating to what is often more obscure, less clear, and normatively weaker terminology, this approach cedes too much power to established interests—namely, the power to determine, unopposed, what counts as progress and development in ways that have allowed elite power groups to push alternative voices to the margins, dominate the majority, and run roughshod over what is in the general interest. These less radical “critiques of progress” however are not the main concern here. My focus is on criticisms that see themselves as targeting something deeper about the very notion of humans making progress in history.

2. Two Kinds of Progress

A common criticism of all radical attacks on progress is to point out that the critics own arguments rely on some notion of progress, which make their position self-contradictory. Critiques of progress claim that there is something wrong with the idea of progress, that it is unachievable, that we would be better off without it, that pursuing it always does more damage than good, and so on. This certainly seems to be a clear case of performative contradiction. Such critics claim that we can improve our situation in some

way—that we can *progress*—by exposing that progress is a myth. If progress cannot be avoided, in the final analysis, even though they understand themselves as radical, these views collapse into a version of the less radical critiques that simply oppose one substantive account of progress in the name of another—albeit one that often remains ill-defined and goes largely undefended and unexamined.

Allen, however, recognizes this problem and believes her approach escapes it. The way she avoids it is by introducing a key distinction between two sorts of progress: what she calls “progress as an imperative” and “progress as a fact.”⁴ This distinction is all-important for Allen. Her entire project is predicated on it. Progress as a value or imperative is forward looking. It represents a moral-political goal that has yet to be achieved. Progress as a fact is strictly backward looking. It represents judgments about developmental learning processes—historical facts that have lead up to the present.

Allen agrees that we need the ideal of progress as a value to guide action. What she rejects is not that progress can or should be made in the future but that any world-historical moral-political developments have already happened. She is not subject then, in any straightforward way, to the standard criticism because there is no contradiction in appealing to progress as a goal to be achieved in the future while rejecting progress as a fact about the past.

According to Allen, both Habermas’ and Honneth’s accounts of progress as a value rely on progress as a historical fact. Their accounts of progress as a value are rejected on account of their being infected by an illegitimate reliance on a problematic+ notion of progress as a fact. On this basis she develops a bold condemnation of contemporary critical theory. It is accused of supporting colonialism, imperialism, racism, domination, and the

exclusion of subaltern subjects.⁵ It is guilty of these unsavoury entanglements because of the vestigial idea of historical development it has failed to escape. Allen can then describe one of the central aims of her project as “decoupling progress as an imperative from progress as a ‘fact’.”⁶ She is critical then, not just of the idea of past progress, but any forward looking account of progress insofar as it relies on the idea of progress in the past. The only legitimate conception of progress as a future oriented imperative is one completely divested of the myth of past progress.

3. Analysing Allen’s Fact/Value Distinction

Drawing a categorical distinction between forward and backward looking conceptions of progress is a mistake. It obfuscates, rather than clarifies, anything about the phenomenon of progress. There is no fundamental difference between positive change in the past and positive change in the future, at least no more than anything else with a temporal existence. That there is a breakfast that I ate in the past and a breakfast that I hope to eat in the future does not mean there are two fundamental conceptions of breakfast. “Breakfast” simply describes the first meal of the day—whether that day is yesterday or tomorrow. But what is worse than the fact that the distinction itself is nugatory is the fact that rejecting the one idea while endorsing the other is an absurdity. To do so is to arbitrarily privilege the current moment. Allen argues that there can be “no inference from the lack of progress in the past to its impossibility in the future.”⁷ While it is obviously true that there is no deductive conclusion to be drawn here, it seems a bizarre argument to rely on in this context. If it is a fact that no progress has ever taken place over the thousands of years of human history, despite the drive to make things better being a powerful motivator of human

activity, what possible reason would we have to think that progress should be adopted as a practical imperative to guide our activity in the future?

If we accept progress as an imperative and reject progress as a fact, one of two situations must obtain—both of which seem implausible at best. Either, progress is possible, but it just so happens there has never been any, and on the date that we achieve any degree of success in our current progressive aims, progress as a fact will cease to be a problem and we can retract any reservations, which would have been made obsolete, or the present is meant to function as some kind of inexplicable moving historical eraser of progress. Bruce Robbins explains well the consequences of this possibility:

If we are prohibited from thinking about progress historically, then as we move day by day into the future, we must ceaselessly deny that anything we have just done was an accomplishment, that is, an instance of progress. We must deny it even though progress is what we are morally enjoined to bring about. And then, having denied that anything we did can count as progress, we must start all over, trying again to bring about progress even though we know, if we are successful, we will again have to repudiate it as not really progress at all. This may tickle those with a taste for the theater of the absurd, but it doesn't seem likely to satisfy the "black, female, queer, colonized and subaltern subjects" in whose name...[Allen's] book claims to be arguing, and for whom progress may be a life-or-death question.⁸

Surprisingly though, in a seeming reversal, Allen does come close to acknowledging a more unified interpretation of progress herself and admitting that her own central distinction captures no important fact about the phenomenon of progress. As she says, both conceptions of progress can be seen as "distinguishable only inasmuch as they are distinct temporal references...indexed to a common set of normative assumptions."⁹ She also acknowledges that a normative standard can be used "to make judgments about what has constituted progress up to now and what would constitute progress in the future."¹⁰ Only at the very end of her book, in a rare moment of self-clarity, does Allen

seems to become conscious of the fact that her actual purpose has been to undercut any strong universalist normative claims running through both conceptions of progress.¹¹ If, as it seems, this is Allen's true purpose, she would be far better off making this case directly and abandoning the notion that there is anything to be gained by insisting on two fundamental notions of progress. Without this, however, she seems to have no way of escaping the charge that her own position is self-contradictory. So, Allen's project now looks to be staring at dead ends whichever direction it turns.

4. General Critiques of Progress as Fact

At the most general level, Allen has two fairly straightforward objections to progress as a fact, one political and one epistemological. Against contemporary critical theory, neither argument gains traction. The political objection is the claim that "the notion of historical progress as a 'fact' is bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonized and racialized subjects"¹² and "insofar as it sees the norms or institutions of European modernity as the outcome of a developmental or learning process...serves the ideological function of rationalizing and legitimizing...imperialism, neo-colonialism and racism."¹³

Here, Allen is employing a staple of the critiques of progress, radical and less radical alike, which is to look at the historical record and selectively pick out terrible things done in the name of progress. These are not hard to find. But this is not a problem for the idea of progress. Pointing out the litany of terrible things done in the name of progress shows that those things are not progress. What it does not show is that there has never been any progress. That horror and oppression are, have been, and, to some extent, are just about certain to remain, wrongs perpetrated in the name of progress, should come as no surprise

at all. So long as there is injustice, violence, oppression, and domination, so long as there are rulers and ruled, masters who command and subjects who obey, those who wield illegitimate power will use every conceivable tool and trick at their disposal to convince the oppressed that their chains set them free, that “progress” consists in nothing other than the maintenance and growth of that which serves to oppress them while maintaining the interests of the privileged. It seems naïve to think that we can look forward to some glorious day of enlightenment when the world will arrive at a full and correct understanding of progress as a value (suitably disentangled from the facts of the past), and we can put the question to rest once and for all. Those who would perpetrate injustice will never stop using power and privilege to make that injustice appear to be its opposite. However, throwing up our hands and walking away from the idea of progress will do no good for any oppressed or disadvantaged peoples. The only useful, emancipatory response is a relentless and abiding vigilance in the form of critique—tirelessly exposing every new form of domination masquerading as progress whenever and wherever it appears.

Allen starts out by making the rather obvious point that neo-colonialism and racism have been rationalised and falsely legitimised by appealing to developmental and learning processes. Her fundamental mistake comes when she goes on to confuse the notion of progress as a fact with specific claims about what constitutes progress—in this case, false, ideological, imperialist claims that maintain various forms of domination. It is always a mistake to conservatively and uncritically accept all the norms and institutions of European modernity—or any cultural formation for that matter—as the unquestionable outcome of a supposed developmental process. Modernity has a mixed record. Many of its features are regressive, many are positive. But how, if at all, can we sort out which ones

are which? It is this question that leads us straight into Allen's second general objection. She claims that grand universal pronouncements about what constitutes progress must presume some kind of indubitable foundation, some metaphysical insight into goodness or the purposive ends of the universe. She asks:

Does a judgment about historical progress not presuppose knowledge of what counts as the end point or goal of that historical development? And how could this be known without having access to some God's-eye point of view?¹⁴

For Allen, then, we have no legitimate basis on which to make universal pronouncements about progress. Criticisms along these lines have also been a staple of the 20th century critiques of progress.

Pace Allen, judgments about progress—determinations of what constitutes positive change—do not require knowledge of any ideal goal or endpoint of history.¹⁵ The only thing we do require is a way to evaluate possible alternatives relative to each other. If I put a bell on my bicycle, for example, that constitutes a development. It improves safety by adding a useful new feature, the capability to easily alert others to the presence of a cyclist. If I puncture the tire of my bicycle with a nail, this feature detracts from its usefulness. In order to make these determinations, I do not need to know what the perfect bicycle is. I have no idea what my ideal bicycle would look like; probably it has not been invented yet. That, however, need not prevent me from recognizing that my bicycle is better with a bell and better without a nail through the tire. Likewise, we need not know what the end-point of history is, or even what the best possible social and political world would be, in order to see, for instance, that a world without slavery is better than one with slavery.

This epistemological criticism also displays Allen's failure to appreciate the real methodological distinctiveness of the critical theory approach. Critical theory shifts the

fundamental question of progress from, “What constitutes progress?”, to the question, “Who gets to decide what constitutes progress?” This approach does not, as Allen suggests, need to start out with a thick conception of progress to which it appeals as a foundation for its normative claims. A universal appeal to reason does not require an objective, impartial position from which some ideally rational judge can decide the direction that human history should take. Rather, it starts from the premise that what counts as a development is never something that should be imposed on anyone. Progress is something that is to be decided by all those affected in a discursive procedure in which everyone is able to participate on par with others. Far from being a foundation, any substantive account of development would be an outcome of the discursive justificatory project enjoined by post-communicative-turn critical theory. This is a fallible, revisable, and ongoing project. Not only does it not require us to have access to a God’s-eye point of view—because communicatively rational justification is immanent to a social lifeworld—but the idea that the only legitimate conceptions of development are those endorsed by those affected functions to rule out precisely the sort of worries already expressed in Allen’s political objection.

5. Specific Critiques of Critical Theory

On account of contemporary critical theory’s reliance on reason, discourse, and justification, Allen suggests that it introduces an implicit class bias.¹⁶ It attempts to universalise what is, in fact, a particular perspective of a class of knowledge experts—particularly Western academics preoccupied with reason giving. At the same time it supposedly fails to recognise “other” ways of being—such as pre-modern or indigenous ways, not fixated on rational justification.¹⁷

The form of practical reason underlying the communicative form of interaction and reconstructed by post-communicative-turn critical theory, seeks to express universal human competencies. The pragmatic presuppositions of the communicative form of interaction—whether expressed through the principle of universalization, the idea of participatory parity, or a basic right to justification that demands reciprocity and generality—function precisely to rule out, not reinforce, class bias. The idea that we have a fundamental human interest in coordinating activity with others, not on the basis of force and coercion, but on the basis of mutually recognised reasons is not, as Allen suggests, an “imposition of the thinking and talking classes on the rest of society.”¹⁸ Thinking and talking are required in every sphere of human life. We are thinking and talking beings. These capacities are not the exclusive domain of any class, race, or culture and reason-giving is certainly not an invention of Western modernity.

What is more, this argument’s acceptance of the premise that “others”—*vis.* any groups that are not Western intellectuals—are not interested in or capable of rational thought and action, is demonstratively false and, moreover, prejudicial and dehumanizing. Allen relies on essentially the same problematic Orientalising premise when she indicts all moral rationalism, including Forst’s, as follows:

Enlightenment conceptions of practical reason, explicitly or implicitly, exclude, repress or dominate all that is associated with the so-called Other of reason [which is] symbolically associated with black, queer, female, colonized and subaltern subjects.¹⁹

There are only two ways to take this argument and it fails either way. It is obvious that any conception of practical reason—including critical theory’s own continuation of the enlightenment project—seeks to exclude irrationality. Consequently, reason certainly would stand in a kind of opposition to, or at least disagreement with, subaltern subjects,

but only if we accept the premise that they are not merely “*so-called*” but *in fact* mad, hysterical, infantile, or otherwise irrational. If we accept, as I think we should, that subaltern subjects are not categorically irrational but have been unfairly and systematically described as such, then clearly they have been repressed by concrete groups and institutions wielding power and privilege, not by reason. Allen however cannot conceptualize this difference, which points to one of the deepest points of disagreement between Allen and critical theory.

This disagreement is not new. It was already a point of contention between Habermas and Foucault. Inspired by poststructuralism, Allen recognises no fundamental distinction between the unforced immanent force of reason and the actual force of non-rational power. She effectively collapses the distinction, fundamental to critical theory, between reason and the communicative form of action, on the one hand, and force, connected to a purely strategic mode of interaction, on the other. For Allen, the ways “reason goes wrong” are themselves simply an “aspect of reason itself.”²⁰ However, if the exercise of coercive force is not contrary to reason, it is not clear by what evaluative criterion it could even be meaningful to describe something to have gone “wrong.” At any rate, Allen’s rejoinder here would be to express her reservations with the idea of some universal reason as a thing separate from social and political power.

No doubt, powerful groups will perennially try to distort conceptions of reason to reinforce their privilege. So then, whose idea of reason are we relying on after all? Echoing criticisms of Kant developed by first generation critical theorists, Allen accuses Forst of an imperialist and authoritarian moral foundationalism. She claims that he is rationalising the illegitimate universal application of Western moral principles based on a

particular, culturally specific notion of reason. In response to Forst's assertion that when it comes to justification, "all we have is the best account of the principles of the practice we call the use of reason,"²¹ Allen claims that:

here the worry about authoritarianism reemerges...who, after all, are 'we' and how does that 'we' go about determining which account of practical reason is best? Can we be confident that 'our' conceptions of practical reason are free of ideological distortions?²²

These all seem like puzzling questions to raise in criticism, in part because they are all points to which contemporary critical theory has devoted a great deal of attention and given clear responses. For the critical theorist, it is clear who the "we" is. Everyone subject to a decision has the fundamental right to participate in making that decision on par with everyone else. No one is excluded. In answer to the question, "How do we decide?", critical theory is discursive all the way down. It is self-reflective in the sense that even its own conception of reason is not shielded from scrutiny. Any participant must be free to introduce any criticism or alternative. And again, by putting the emphasis on the question "who decides?" critical theory is able to expose any form of domination as illegitimate. The only fully rational agreement is the one in which everyone involved has an equal voice.

Finally, with respect to the question of whether or not we can have confidence that our conceptions of practical reason are free from ideological distortions, in one sense, the answer is no—never entirely. The critical theory tradition has a sophisticated and powerful analysis of how systems of power operate and how these interact with the rational, communicatively established forms of interaction that make up the lifeworld. The ideal of a free and fair communicatively rational procedure (captured by Habermas in the idealising pragmatic presuppositions of discourse) is just that—an ideal. It is only ever approximated in real discourse. Insofar as discourse is impure, distorted by the influence of non-rational

power dynamics, the results of that discourse will be tainted. Insofar as the conditions of a discourse approach the ideal, our conclusions approach perfect legitimacy, but they never reach it. Discourse ethics is fallibilist, not foundationalist. There is no indubitable bedrock, no divine or transcendent assurances. We can never be one hundred percent sure that any conclusion is without ideological distortions—including our ideas about practical reason. This quasi-transcendental approach does not offer the same kind of assurances claimed by a Kantian transcendental deduction based on pure practical reason.

This is a problem, however, only if we are demanding certainty. Despite her accusations of Forst, it is Allen who refuses to let go of the enlightenment impulse towards foundationalism, not critical theory. Of course, Allen can point out that it is one thing to say that discursive reason is a fallible procedure for generating validity claims, but this enterprise only gets off the ground once we have an idealized procedure in which we can trust. So, Allen asks: what justifies the procedure that constitutes the discursive form of practical reason in the first place?²³ If critical theory relies on communicative reason, “Can’t we just ask what grounds the appeal to the normative content of the account of practical reason itself?”²⁴ What Allen is asking for here is a rational justification of reason, but it is impossible to give a reasoned argument without presupposing rational principles—the thing we are being asked to prove. So, Allen will not find the foundation she is asking for, in critical theory or anywhere else.

Here, once again, Allen completely misses what is distinctive about the contemporary critical theorists she is criticising. For the critical theorist, asking what justifies the normative content of reason is like asking why is it a problem that a position is self-contradictory, or why it would be illegitimate for me to torture my dialogue partners

until they assent to my interpretation and then claim that we had arrived at a rational consensus. Contemporary critical theory understands communicative action—action that coordinates human activity not on the basis of force but by coming to a shared understanding through rational dialogue—as a fundamental mode of human interaction, empirically reinforced as an anthropologically deep-seated fact of all human cultures. Short of total madness or social isolation on a desert island, there is simply no way to relinquish the communicative mode of interaction. Moreover, human beings have a fundamental interest in emancipating ourselves from domination by strengthening this communicative mode of interaction. There is no rational argument for communicative reason but a quasi-transcendental, pragmatic claim that there is no alternative to it and a universal human interest in reinforcing it. I cannot mount a defence of this approach here. My point is simply this: by asking, “Can’t we just ask what grounds the appeal to the normative content of the account of practical reason itself?”, as if this were not a central concern already addressed by Habermas and Forst, Allen fails to engage with—in fact virtually ignores—the real normative arguments of contemporary critical theory.

6. Conclusions

Allen begins from the same problematic *all-or-nothing* premise of the conservative Hegelian philosophy of history she rejects. That approach represents the “*all*” alternative, which sees Western modernity as an inevitable, unidirectional, outcome of the unfolding of reason in history. Allen’s “*nothing*” alternative is to deny that human history, and Western modernity in particular, have developed our moral-political sphere in any way. Either approach is radically inimical to the project of real development, and for the same reason. Future progress depends precisely on our ability to look critically at the past

in order to disentangle the positive changes we want to take up and build upon from the regressive tendencies that should be jettisoned. In this process, we do need to interrogate any claims about past or future progress with a particularly heightened degree of scepticism when they originate within any dominant and powerful group. But this does not mean that universally applicable validity claims about progress originating in any tradition, including Western modernity, can be simply dismissed in one stroke.

Universality is not a purely transcendent idea for critical theory. It rather connotes a wide sphere of application, immanent to human social life. Likewise, there is no known or prescribed course or end point of human history. It is precisely because progress is not inevitable or irreversible that it is such a fragile achievement. And it is precisely because it is such a fragile achievement that we must seek to recognise it, foster and protect it, praise and celebrate it, strengthen and grow it, wherever and whenever we find it. This means not allowing a healthy degree of openness and humility to grow into a pathological, self-deprecating fear of self-congratulation so strong that it stands in the way of even recognizing, let alone protecting, those fragile developments on which our future learning and development depend.

A central impetus for Allen's strenuous critique of progress as a fact is the desire to avoid our self-congratulatory impulses. The critique fixates on the worry that admitting the existence of any past historical progress will lead to a wholehearted embrace of the supremacy of contemporary Western culture, seen as the inexorable outcome of a developmental learning process, but this worry is not well-founded. An arrogant and conservative self-assurance about the rightness of one's own inherited tradition is a real tendency that must be confronted, but there is no reason to think that congratulating

ourselves for things we get right must prevent us from taking a hard look at the things we get wrong. Future development requires us to do both, but, as I have shown, Allen is unable to do this.

The way forward does not involve abandoning progress, as a goal or as a fact about our past. Moral-political progress is an emancipatory project realized through the rationalization of the moral-political sphere. Redressing domination will involve finding and improving ways of coordinating our activity, not on the basis of force or manipulation, but of communicative reason. So long as approaches, such as Allen's, fail even to recognise a fundamental distinction between reason and power, they will be unable to contribute to a critical and progressive discourse that recognises and seeks to redress forms of domination—including the ongoing oppression of subaltern and postcolonial subjects.

Endnotes

¹ For example, see Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004); Chris Hedges, *The World as It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (New York: Nation Books, 2011); William Ralph Inge, "The Idea of Progress," *Outspoken Essays, Second Series* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922), 158–183; Yvonne Burgess, *The Myth of Progress* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1994); Merhdad M. Zarandi, ed. *Science and the Myth of Progress* (Bloomington Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2004), and John Gray, *The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths* (New York: Allen Lane, 2013).

² Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

³ James Tully, personal correspondence cited in Allen, 3.

⁴ Allen, 12.

⁵ Allen, 16 & 22.

⁶ Allen, 226.

⁷ Allen, 226.

⁸ Bruce Robbins, "Proving the Impossibility of Progress" *Los Angeles Review of Books* (May 15, 2016). <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/proving-impossibility-progress/> (accessed October 28, 2016).

⁹ Allen, 227.

¹⁰ Allen, 229.

¹¹ Allen, 227.

¹² Allen, 19.

¹³ Allen, 22.

¹⁴ Allen, 19.

¹⁵ A similar argument is developed in Sen's critique of "ideal justice" (although, in my view, the conclusions he draws go too far in some respects); see Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Allen, 152.

¹⁷ Allen has remarkably little to say about what she actually has in mind here.

¹⁸ Allen, 153.

¹⁹ Allen, 137.

²⁰ Allen, 219.

²¹ Rainer Forst, "Justifying Justification: Reply to My Critics," in *Justice, Democracy and the Right to Justification: Rainer Forst in Dialogue*, ed. David Owen (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 182.

²² Allen, 137.

²³ Allen, 130.

²⁴ Allen, 136.