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Progress is Back

Marc Fleurbaey and Marie-Laure Salles-Djelic ¹

Abstract: This paper presents the International Panel on Social Progress and expounds key ideas from its first report, *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century* (Cambridge U. P., 2018). It emphasizes the importance of three dimensions of progress on which serious challenges need to be addressed: equity, freedom and sustainability. Addressing these challenges primarily requires reforming power and governance structures in the economy, society, and politics.

The linear view of progress promised by the Enlightenment was deeply weakened by the horrors of the 20th Century. It has also, according to Wagner (2016), lost momentum after the abolition of most forms of formal domination (serfdom, slavery, female subordination). And the profound ecological, social and technological disruptions of our contemporary world would only come to reinforce, it seems, a widespread disillusion with the idea of progress. But Wagner identifies three ways in which progress can (and should) be revived and reoriented for the 21st century: 1) building democratic agency; 2) overcoming new kinds of domination; 3) avoiding hubris (in our interaction with Nature).

The International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP 2018) has adopted a similar stance with respect to the idea of progress. The IPSP emerged as the bottom-up initiative of a group of scholars, with the blessing of an advisory committee chaired by Amartya Sen. We decided to claim the “progress” banner to clearly assert that, when studying the long term evolution of societies, it is worthwhile and important to be guided by normative principles. Other panels, which often refrain from making explicit recommendations (e.g., the IPCC’s mantra is to be “policy-relevant but not policy-prescriptive”), are nevertheless inevitably guided by normative considerations (e.g., in the case of the IPCC, the goal of preventing “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate”, as stipulated in Art. 2 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change). The IPSP rejects the old-fashioned linear view of progress and rejects the neo-imperialist idea that there is only one direction for all regions of the world and for all cultures. But the IPSP also rejects a form of lazy relativism that would be oblivious to the important convergence of many parts of the world toward basic values of human flourishing and equal dignity, and it rejects the claims to authenticity made by the oppressive traditions that resist this convergence.

Why a new panel?

The creation of the IPSP has been motivated by the lack of collective effort, in public debates around the world, to define the direction that the social contract should take in this crucial period. The 21st century will probably be remembered as a major crossroads in the history of

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humanity. After the tyrannical ideologies of the 20th century have been crushed, in the streets and the trenches, as well as in the minds of the masses, today the faith in the market and liberal democracy that prevailed at the end of the last century is clearly showing its limits and flaws. While our contemporary form of liberal capitalism generates significant financial, social and political instability, it also appears to lead humanity towards outright ecological disaster. As shown in various protest movements such as Occupy, the Yellow Vests, or the students' climate change protests, the call for rethinking the social contract, for curbing the irresponsible excesses of global elites (e.g., tax evasion), for eradicating deep poverty, for preventing the revival of authoritarianism, and for addressing the environmental threats is becoming everyday more urgent.

Existing initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on climate mitigation, the OECD work on inclusive growth, the World Bank reports on improving governance and rethinking the social contract, the T20 and T7 work on social cohesion,² have all been pushing compelling agendas, even if they do not seem to be powerful enough to curb the most worrisome developments of recent decades. Adding the voice of social scientists to the public debate, in a document that makes available the bulk of academic work on social trends to a wider audience, could help in bringing new ideas and new momentum to the search for solutions.

To put it bluntly, after the traumatic episodes of fascism and Stalinism, and after the failure of liberalism to deliver on its promise of emancipation and effective management of human (and environmental) affairs, we are in great need of finding a new compass. It can no longer be a totalitarian ideology, it can no longer be based on the exclusion or the elimination of a particular category of the population, it can no longer rely on blind faith in automatic mechanisms such as the market or algorithms, and it can no longer be subservient to technocrats or any type of elite.

A report produced by a panel like the IPSP cannot deliver such a vision in a radically innovative way, because it primarily synthesizes existing knowledge, but it can provide the tools and the bricks for the construction of a new vision, or multiple new visions. The small book that accompanies the report was written to reach a wider audience (Fleurbaey et al. 2018) and it is more daring in its search for a new vision. This paper builds upon and draws from both texts.

An alarmed celebration of success

The IPSP report is playing a balancing act between acknowledging the remarkable achievements that have been made since WWII and warning against the looming threats that are emerging.

On the positive side, it is hard to define what is most rejoicing about past achievements: the drastic reduction in deep poverty, the increase in life expectancy and improvements in health in general, the end of colonial domination and the spread of democratic institutions,

² See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>, <http://www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/>, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/eca-social-contract>, <https://www.g20-insights.org>, <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/T7/T7-2018-Recommendations-Realized.html>.

the economic growth and the surge of a new middle class in emerging economies, broader and cheaper access to information and communication, the end of various forms of segregations and the greater inclusion of women, LGBTQ and ethnic groups, not to forget major inroads in the protection of nature and the fight against certain pollutants like CFCs or HFCs... We live in a world that is much less unequal, much more open-minded and inclusive, in many ways, than 75 years ago.

Yet, while humanity would appear to be at the peak of its possibilities, the report also warns that we are facing an abyss. The benefits of development and globalization have been spread very unequally and the populations left behind live in increasingly unstable settings and conditions; the new rise of authoritarianism and identity politics builds upon the anxieties and worries of populations whose lives are being disrupted; technological innovation is unsettling the make-up of the labor market and even our own identity as human beings; corruption and the capture of politics by financial interests pulls the trust of the electorate in political institutions down to an all-time low; the degradation of the environment is not being curbed on some key fronts such as pesticides, antibiotics, plastic or CO2 emissions.

Vicious circles around these worrisome trends can unravel many of our past achievements: economic inequalities generate social unrest that then destabilizes the political system and undermines efforts to protect the environment; the politics of identity exploited by cynical elites rip societies apart and disrupt international cooperation; environmental degradation and climate change threaten vulnerable populations; migrations triggered by conflicts or by poverty jeopardize social peace in recipient areas and drain communities in sending areas. Tipping points are often discussed in relation to climate change, but the most sensitive and dangerous tipping points probably lie in our fragile socio-economic and political systems, which will become dysfunctional before the environment itself unleashes deadly forces.

We are therefore facing the real possibility of a catastrophic collapse, not necessarily of “civilization”, but of key elements of the current unstable equilibrium, such as democratic institutions, integrated trade and communications, or ambitious safety nets.

The three pillars of social progress

The report is not pessimistic, though. Possibilities are real for improving our institutions and our norms. We not only have reached high levels of economic and institutional development but we have also developed a fair amount of knowledge about what works and what doesn't. Market failures have been studied in great details, and government failures are also better understood. Even corporate failure is on the radar of many analysts. It is now hard to defend policy recipes which rely on a naïve faith in any one of these institutions, but this is in fact (and should be seen as) a positive development. The death of illusions paves the way for realistic ventures.

Still, we are confronted by a key challenge – the imperative necessity to work on three fronts simultaneously, lest the vicious circles mentioned earlier kick in and divert our path toward failure. We must at the same time promote equity, sustainability, and freedom (including democracy). Our progress imperative, today, has three main pillars.

The first pillar of contemporary progress is equity, and especially the reduction of inequalities. There are three forms of inequalities which need urgent redress. The first is the lack of development in certain parts of the world, especially in Africa, where large pockets of poverty and high fertility offer a grim outlook of the future. The second is the extreme concentration of wealth that has resulted from a combination of decreasing redistribution, expansion of opportunities in globalized markets with winner-take-all patterns, and unhinged rent seeking in the financial sector. The third is the concentration of power in politics and the economy, with an excessive influence of wealth and financial interests, and the appearance of transnational economic giants. These inequalities stunt people's opportunities and in fact not only their own but also that of their children. In countries with high levels of inequalities, such as the USA (IPSP, Chapter 3), social mobility is significantly reduced. Where you are born in the world greatly determines not only where you end up in the global income distribution but also the range of economic and social opportunities you have access to (Milanovic 2016).

The second pillar of progress is sustainability, and here also there is great concern that little is being done to curb current worrying trends with regard to the degradation of our natural environment and the disruption of climate equilibria. Some past successes such as the fight against the ozone hole or SO₂ might suggest solutions for the gridlock on other fronts such as CO₂. It would be indeed promising to combine targets for pollution reduction with advantages in funding, technological transfers, and trade arrangements, as well as enlist business innovation toward greening production and consumption patterns and helping developing countries to leapfrog to a green configuration.

The third pillar of progress is freedom, understood in a comprehensive way and therefore encompassing the protection of human rights, the rule of law, and democratic decision-making. According to the dataset produced by Polity, the number of countries defined as democracies has been increasing until 2017³, but the definition of democracy is minimal in this type of statistics. It is hard, for instance, to describe the US political system as a democracy when so much, in the political dynamics of that country, is determined by money and so little by the popular vote (Bartels 2016). The deconsolidation of democracy observed by Foa and Mounk (2016) through the decreasing support for democratic political institutions across generations resonates with many observers' sense of alarm at the rise of illiberal regimes over the world, including at the very center of Europe. This deconsolidation trend is, however, often over-interpreted. A survey done by IPSP in the USA, for instance, shows that the population still supports democracy. Moreover, it believes in a participatory form of democracy in equal proportions as classical forms of electoral competition, would like to give much more power to ordinary citizens, and is favorable to the expansion of democracy to other institutions, especially business companies (Fleurbaey 2018). Therefore, a more accurate reading of current trends might be that people are increasingly dissatisfied with the flaws of the currently corrupt political institutions that usurp the title of democracies, but are not enamored with authoritarianism and actually long for a more authentic, more participatory form of democracy.

The challenge for the current era is that the promotion of progress is bound to fail if any of the three pillars falters. The Western way of life as we know it was environmentally possible

³ See <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity1.htm>.

only because drastic inequalities in development prevented its geographical spread. But as emerging economies aspire to the same standards of living, the impact of excessive energy use and pollution on our planet becomes unmitigated and devastating. Even moderate inequities in the French tax system have been enough recently to block modest policies toward carbon pricing. Hence, the protection of the environment is impossible without a legitimate and durable social contract and there is no legitimate or durable social contract without social justice.

Likewise, many pundits muse about the Chinese way and the possibility to more effectively impose changes in lifestyles and industrial development, or even population growth, through authoritarian policies. But this largely appears to be an illusion. No authoritarian regime escapes the trap of corruption, and the Chinese is no exception. And no culture in the world, no matter how holistic and collectivist, seems to make authoritarianism and abuse of power viable in the long run. Trying even to have a short period of authoritarianism during the transition to a green economy is more unrealistic than any other transition scenario, and the return path back from dictatorship and abuse is generally very painful. Therefore, there is no credible scenario in which equity and sustainability could be achieved without freedom and democracy.

Finally, there is no sustainable and inclusive social and political system without a stable ecosystem. Environmental degradation and natural catastrophes have social, economic and political consequences that are becoming ever more profound and destabilizing. Everywhere in the world we now see bodies in the streets after floods and wildfires. Conflicts that emerge with climate migration or around the issue of access to vital and fragile resources, such as food or water, will rise to unbearable intensities if nothing serious is done to stabilize our climate and ecosystems. The current human species, with its level of intelligence, has been around for hundreds of millennia, and its development to the current stage has been possible only after the Holocene miraculously stabilized temperature at a moderate level. In spite of our modern knowledge, science and technology, we are neither equipped nor ready to deal with the shocks that are bound to strike our communities as those stable conditions are threatened in the coming decades.

Power, power, power

In front of this daunting challenge, the IPSP does not propose magic wands or easy solutions. In particular, the difficulties of failed states in high-conflict areas are particularly hard to address without strong external support and equally hard to manage with external intrusion, the latter being increasingly difficult to legitimate.

But a general thread through the report is that rather than focus on resources, it may be more promising to go a little upstream and focus on the mechanisms by which decisions are made. Power is important in three ways.

First, it is a key dimension of human flourishing. People need agency, they need some degree of control over their lives, and this is strongly correlated to a sense of dignity. Being strongly dependent on others for one's livelihood or for key decisions in one's life is not compatible with full development. This does not mean that an individualistic view of life is promoted in the report. On the contrary, it is argued that the individual and the collective can weave their projects in an intimate way. Everyone's flourishing is in good part requiring

to go beyond the self and to develop one's projects through collective endeavors and strong social ties. But this is not the same thing as sacrificing individual flourishing to the authority of the group or the authority of leaders in the group. Dignity is an important value that is often invoked by disadvantaged people, and it captures very well the sense of impoverishment and debasement that accompanies unbalanced relationships with powerful people. Dignity is obtained not just by a decent standard of living, but at least as much by a decent status in the hierarchy of power.

The second way in which power is essential is that it determines how decisions are made in other spheres, in particular with respect to the allocation of resources. Governance structures are crucial features of every organization and system. The low level of trust of contemporary electorates in political systems reflects the beliefs that those systems are rigged and that politicians are not listening to people like them, which is largely accurate. International organizations are still dominated by rich countries and this undermines the possibilities for global cooperation and hinders action on many fronts, from development and trade to climate change. Where power is more equally shared, as in the UN General Assembly and similar bodies, one sees that decisions are characteristically different from what rich countries would favor. The Security Council is paralyzed by the extraordinary power of its permanent members. Similarly, in the economic world, people have low trust in big companies and indeed the concentration of power in corporations paves the way for extensive rent seeking and corruption. It also generates toxic behavior because when organizations such as business companies are captured by small groups (CEOs and active shareholders), these groups orient the organization towards their narrow interests and treat all other stakeholders as costs that need to be minimized or externalized. Hence a pattern of squeezing workers until they quit, de-localizing production or replacing manual labor by machines, which all generate on the one hand higher profits for shareholders but also, on the other hand, significant negative costs and consequences for local communities. Likewise, the environmental consequences of the firm's activities are externalized as much as possible on the rest of society. As these examples show, excessive power concentration is everywhere preventing more progressive and responsible decisions from being made because the narrow interests that dominate decision-making processes reject the negative consequences on other parts of society. In contrast, an inclusive form of governance can at least partially contain and limit this kind of cost externalization logic. It may not be sufficient, of course, because relevant stakeholders, such as future generations or other species, may never have access to the decision process. This therefore requires additional safeguards that can be provided by a well-organized and common-good, long-term oriented central political process.

Finally, power is important in a third way. Protecting its fair distribution among stakeholders prevents the spillovers from other inequities. It is not just unfair and counterproductive to concentrate power in the hands of a few. It is especially egregious if the powerful few happen to be advantaged in terms of wealth, gender, and race, and if they got access to power through these other advantages conferred by their economic success or their social status. Shielding the distribution of power from other inequities is therefore absolutely central. It is sometimes believed that power has to be associated with property, for instance in business firms. The only way to achieve social justice is then to jointly distribute property and power, or to focus on property redistribution and let power follow from this. But this is typically not said in relation to political power. It would indeed be odd to argue that power

should go to the rich anyway and that redistributing wealth will ensure that the political system will be less unfair. While it is true that protecting politics from money is hard, the more typical view is that political power should not automatically go to the rich and that the influence of money should be stringently controlled. The same view should prevail everywhere, including in the economy. It is possible to share power more equitably and to disconnect it from wealth. In the case of business firms, what justifies an inclusive governance involving non-wealthy stakeholders is that these stakeholders do have stakes, and often (as is the case with workers) have great competence to help with managing the organization.

This focus on power does not mean that the other dimensions are not important. They are and it is important to prevent spillovers between these dimensions, especially between resources, status and power. But the Gordian knot that needs to be cut in order to make progress on the front of inequalities, freedom and sustainability lies in where and how decisions are made in the economy, in politics and in all settings, including families, for instance.

For all this focus on governance and power, however, the report is not at all envisioning a classical fight for political power as the main way to carve a route toward social progress. In particular, the report highlights the emergence of civil society as a new actor of change. It is through multiple actions and especially through the loose but effective coordination of multiple grassroots initiatives that social progress can be pushed forward. While classical organizations such as trade unions or political parties have been on the decline, others have emerged, in particular NGOs and associations, but also a great variety of coalitions of local actors (interesting in that respect is the global coalition of progressive cities, the c40 cities but there are many other examples). Civil society in the many different forms it takes today may be the key resource to tap when one seeks to set up whistleblower and watchdog platforms and systems for the preservation of commons and vital resources, for the control of private corporations, government, the internet, the media, or for the exercise of participatory democracy, and so on. Today, we are in the position to project ourselves as being at the dawn of a new era – where participatory economic organization should replace the predatory forms of contemporary capitalism, where political democracy should be strengthened through participatory deliberation and representation, and where the exploitation of nature will give way to a more responsible and respectful interaction with our environment and ecosystem. Unfortunately, however, as noted by the late Erik Olin Wright (2010), what is feasible and viable may not always be reachable through an easy transition. The report does not tread on the issue of political strategies and leaves it to its readers and to our organized communities of actors to develop and deploy progressive scenarios.

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