

THE RIGHT FOR DEFENCE AGAINST PROGRESS

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The notion of ‘progress,’ according to **Walter Galli**, is ‘essentially contentious.’ It is *duly* included into different political and ideological projects, and hence *it cannot but have* different interpretations.

As **Daniel Bertaux** accurately pointed out (RJ: Standpoint of the Week, 2010, #4, p.20), ‘*Today no reactionary will ever admit to being one.*’ After all, everyone is either a ‘progressive,’ or a ‘democrat,’ or ‘advocate of liberty.’ Nonetheless, all this tells us is the necessity of an argument on ‘progress,’ such as notions of ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom,’ but fails to provide any insight as to the specific direction of the different ‘progressive’ groups. The postmodernist debunking of ‘progress’ also confirms this. Of course, there would be no need to debunk ‘progress’ if it was not an *irremovable* topic of *modern* discourse. Removable topics *are often forgotten about*, and, as a result,

debunking them is the most reliable way to overcome them. Nevertheless, it is evident that such a method is not effective when dealing with ‘progress.’

Now, no matter how diverse and even ambivalent modern interpretations of ‘progress’ are, they are discernible as participating in the same dispute, i.e. the dispute on *the same topic*. However, the widely sought after ‘same topic’ can in no way be viewed as the common denominator of modern interpretations of ‘progress,’ because they are largely dispersed and the presence of such a denominator would be stretched too thin, content-wise, to explain anything within the framework of the current dispute on ‘progress.’ All we need to do, ‘genealogically,’ is to locate the *dispute’s point of departure*, from whereupon we can return to critically debunk modern interpretations of ‘progress’ and obtain self-determination, even in such a thoroughly mutated, if not degenerated and diluted form as presented by, say, concepts of ‘modernisation.’

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Undoubtedly, Tony Judt is right in noting that the ‘**gravitation**’ of the concept of ‘progress’ is to the ‘**left side.**’ Despite its amorphous understanding as a *critical* re-evaluation of the status-quo and as an irreducible *moral* assessment of social phenomena through considerations of economic effectiveness or within the spirit of *raison d’etat*, under the current conditions, this debate usually implies criticising the ideology and practices of the ‘free market’ and this or that version of social-democratic and political orientation. (See RJ, 2010, #4, p. 16).

Modern history has detected deep paradoxes in the practices of ‘progress.’ It has, for example, detected the inseparability of

‘progress’ from ‘regress.’ It has demonstrated the inherent restriction in the ‘mind’ and its *bias*, not just in relation to something, but also to someone, and has refuted the belief in its teleological directionality towards the plateaux of prosperity and social harmony not only by great tragedies and periods of ‘stagnation’ by the Soviets, but also in the West, which was referred to as the ‘end of history’ by one humorous modern philosopher.

If the idea and practices of ‘progress’ are so tragically paradoxical, how can we *reconstruct* the earlier, optimistic, and naive ‘intellectual’ notion of ‘progress?’ That’s exactly the way we are forced to pose the question, because of the dynamics and intensity of the changes we are facing that comprise the very ‘spirit of modernity.’ This does not give us a chance to resort to such truly radical alternatives to ‘progress’ as ‘returning to the past,’ ‘ending growth,’ or to the practical embodiment of utopia that proclaims ‘small is beautiful.’ It is exactly the impossibility of *such* alternatives to ‘progress’ that determines our incessant modern day disputes about it!

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There are two major ways of such *reconstruction*. The first implies cutting from ‘progress’ its ‘educational,’ normative, and liberating promises and aligning it with the notion of adjusting or ‘perfecting’ *certain institutions*. The second is to bind ‘progress’ to the ‘*cause of liberation,*’ without believing that it will ever bring about an ideal society of freedom and social harmony, and assess social institutions based on their ‘progressiveness’ or by the degree to which they either contribute to or hinder the liberation of those who are oppressed.

The first way of restructuring the notion of ‘progress’ expresses its absorption by the right, or conservative forces, if we connect ‘right-sidedness’ and ‘conservatism’ not to party self-names (which mean next to nothing in today’s politics), but to tenacious political, cultural, and moral orientations. The second way implies the characteristic ‘leftist’ transformation of the idea of ‘progress,’ which is typical for anti-globalism as well as for a number of ‘new democratic movements,’ residual leftist segments of social democracy, and for some protest movements in the third world.

I would also note in passing that the so-called removal of contradictions between the left and the right ‘progressivism’ that is expected by some individuals, from, for example, President Medvedev’s ideological course, demonstrates either a misunderstanding of the logic, character, and causes of the modern discourse on ‘progress,’ or the complicity, either conscious or unconscious, in establishing a ‘right-wing’ hegemony over the ‘left,’ a part of which is pushing out ‘leftist’ liberationist interpretations of ‘progress’ from the public sphere.

On the whole, it contributes in a similar manner to the fixation with Barack Obama’s ‘progressivism’ in the public consciousness. Obama’s ‘Change Campaign,’ of course issues curtsies to the local ‘insulted and humiliated,’ but even the odious G. W. Bush with his ‘Compassionate conservatism’ was already performing these tactics in his own way. However, Obama does not let even a shadow of doubt be cast on the fact that to him, ‘progress’ is inseparable from the very same structures of oligarchic financial capitalism that threw the world into the current global crisis and are bound to do so again in the future with greater intensity. In spite of whatever is said about Obama’s ‘progressivism’ by the American media, it is essentially the same as right-wing conservative progressivism, and the same can be said about Medvedev’s ‘progressivism’ as well.



There is a philosophical term, ‘abstract empiricism,’ and it is characteristic of right-wing ‘progressivism.’ ‘Progress,’ as we have said, is identified by the right with ‘perfecting’ certain institutions, the ones of ‘free market,’ ‘rational administration,’ ‘global communications,’ or ‘forefront science.’ All those who hinder the ‘perfection’ of such institutions, *selected* by the right-wing conservative ‘progressives,’ are labelled as ‘obstacles on the path of progress,’ and all those who suffer from such ‘perfection’ are viewed as the ‘cost of progress.’

‘Obstacles’ should be overcome, and the ‘price’ needs to be paid. ‘Nothing else is given.’ It is abstracting from the real and specific social context, in which the ‘progress’ *should be* implemented. And there are no major differences between the implementation of ‘the civilising mission of the white man’ in Africa in the 19th century and the market reforms carried out in the post-Soviet space at the end of the 20th century.

At the same time, this **abstract ‘progressivism’ is empirical**, because the institutions that are identified with ‘progress’ are the existing ones, the ones present as ‘facts.’ These ‘facts,’ extrapolated into the future, are depicted as ‘the laws of progress.’ To Herbert

Spencer, the great fighter for ‘progress’ (the latter understood as the expansion of the ‘free market’ of Victorian England) the installation of street gas lamps with the efforts of local authorities appeared as a monstrous encroachment on the freedom of enterprise and as a foreboding of coming despotism. Future freedom of mankind was intrinsically related to a completely free, private enterprise-driven economy. Current judgements about a (happy) future of mankind, provided for by free development of a global market, in no way surpass the indicated inferences made by Spencer, from the standpoint of their analytical merits.

Leftist ‘progressivism’ sets the historical and political reality against all that. It stands up for **the right of those who suffer from ‘progress’ to defend themselves from it**. Rarely has such defence ensured victory, but quite often it has led to such an adaptation of ‘progress’ to the existing social contexts that it has made it less barbaric. This is exactly how the world was saved from that very Victorian-type ‘free market.’ I believe it to be the moral and political prism through which we should look at the diversities of ‘progressivism,’ which has now become a topic of considerable discussion in the ‘Russian Journal.’ ■

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