

After progress: Experiments in the revaluation of values

The Sociological Review Monographs
2022, Vol. 70(2) 217–231
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00380261221084417
journals.sagepub.com/home/sor



Martin Savransky

Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Craig Lundy

School of Social Sciences and Professions, London Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

What might it take to learn to think and live after progress? The notion of ‘progress’ is arguably the defining idea of modernity: a civilisational imagery of a boundless, linear and upwards trajectory towards a future that, guided by reason and technology, will be ‘better’ than the present. It was this notion that placed techno-science at the heart of the modern political culture, and it was the global unevenness of ‘progress’ that imagined European imperialism as a civilising mission inflicted upon ‘backward’ others for their own sake. Whilst during the postcolonial era the modern idea of progress and its deleterious consequences on a global scale have deservedly been the object of fierce criticism, ‘progress’, its promises and its discontents still command global political imaginations, values and policies to this day. In the wake of its devastating social, political and ecological effects, this article argues that the imperative of progress is now one we cannot live with but do not know how to live without. Thinking of progress not as one modern value among others but as the very mode of evaluation from which modern values are derived, this article provides an introductory exploration of the question of what thinking and living after progress might mean. It also provides an overview of the many contributions that compose this monograph, as divergent experiments in the radical revaluation of our values.

Keywords

colonialism, ecology, Nietzsche, progress, values

Outposts of progress

‘In a hundred years’, said Carlier, ‘there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue – and all.

Corresponding author:

Martin Savransky, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: m.savransky@gold.ac.uk

And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!’ Kayerts, his trading station chief, nodded approvingly: ‘Yes’, he replied, ‘it is a consolation to think of that’ (Conrad, 2002, p. 9). Tasked by the Great Trading Company with taking charge of a trading station in a remote part of Africa, the two men instead ‘got on well together in the fellowship of their stupidity and laziness. Together they did nothing, absolutely nothing, and enjoyed the sense of the idleness for which they were paid’ (2002, p. 7). Indeed, the only reason these ‘pioneers of trade and progress’ had the conversation from which a sense of consolation derived was that, after several months of doing nothing except looking ‘on their empty courtyard in the vibrating brilliance of vertical sunshine’, they came across a wreck of novels and some old copies of a home paper left behind by the previous occupant of the post, whose life had withered away after a bout of fever. The print, in particular, extolled the promises of ‘Our Colonial Expansion’ in the loftiest language, allowing them for a brief moment to forget the death of their predecessor while rendering their purposeless lives the very spearheads of progress, their idle days an exemplar of ‘the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth’. If the promise of a future modern civilisation looking back at the foundations of its progressive fate served as consolation, therefore, it was because the present that these two white, largely pathetic characters inhabited was nothing if not thoroughly debased, void not only of all the ‘virtues’ that were the object of Kayerts and Carlier’s momentary aspirations, but also of any sense of significance, of purpose, meaning, of a life worth living there and then.

But the consolation was just that – a brief moment of solace and comfort. For indeed, Joseph Conrad’s classic story is nothing if not a story of descent: of the plundering and colonial exploitation of Africa, of Kayerts’s and Carlier’s lives into illness and suicide, of their promises of global trade and profit into slavery and ivory extraction, their colonial dreams of civilisation into the shambles. If widely – and rightly – regarded as an early critique of colonialism, based on Conrad’s own experience at Congo, it is especially apposite that the title of this story be none other than ‘An Outpost of Progress’. For indeed, while there has been no shortage of consoling thinkers who insist, with sociologist Robert Nisbet (1980, p. 8), that ‘the idea of progress . . . has done more good over a twenty-five hundred-year period, led to more creativeness in more spheres, and given more strength to human hope and to individual desire for improvement than any other single idea in Western history’, descent too paradoxically accompanies the story of this commanding idea, this all-pervading imagery which promised a boundless moral, social and economic ascent – guided by reason and technology – towards an open-ended but ever ‘better’ future. And it is from the ruins of some of its multiple ramshackle outposts, in the wake of its often devastating effects, that the contributions to this *Sociological Review* monograph situate themselves: as heterogeneous propositions in a collective experiment to imagine forms of social thought and social life *after* progress.

The idea of progress may, according to Nisbet (1980), have roots in the long Christian tradition. But there is no doubt that it was in the eighteenth century that imperial Europe placed its promise and power at the very heart of the project of Modernity. Animated as much by the extractive activities of its various imperial and colonial ‘outposts’ as by the scientific, industrial and political revolutions that transformed Europe – and much of the world – in the eighteenth century, ‘progress’ became the guiding modern philosophy of

history ever since, inaugurating a new experience of time that claimed to break with the eschatological temporality of previous absolutist forms of government in which predictions of the coming End of the World and the Final Judgement set limits to human ambition and hope. Instead, progress engendered a new, universal historicity which 'made possible the attribution to history of the latent power of human events and suffering, a power that connected and motivated everything in accordance with a secret or evident plan to which one could feel responsible, or in whose name one could believe oneself to be acting' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 35). It opened up 'a future that transcended the hitherto predictable, natural space of time and experience, and thence – propelled by its own dynamic – provoked new, transnatural, long-term prognoses' (2004, p. 22).

It was this new historicity that, among societies who defined themselves as or aspired to be 'modern' (Chatterjee, 1993), in turn gave rise to a conception of the social as a sphere of autonomy, one capable – by nothing but its own means and aspirations – to work towards an open-ended future in which hopes of desired prosperity and affluence (intellectual, scientific, political, material, moral and cultural) would progressively be fulfilled (Charbonnier, 2021). And if the notion of progress opened up the future, rendered it largely unknown and unimagined – save, perhaps, for science fiction writers and other 'prophets of progress' (Bowler, 2017) – yet filled with hope and promise, this new philosophy of history powered by techno-capitalism and its fossils in turn engendered a new everyday experience at the heart of modern Europe. A mode of experience, in other words, which dramatically distanced collective expectations from all previous experience, introducing a chasm between past and future which was 'fed continually from a number of sources: technical development, the increase of population, the social unfolding of human rights, and the corresponding shift in political systems' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 60).

As such, by the end of the nineteenth century progress had become not merely one idea among others but a settled and almost universal faith betraying the very trajectory of History (Bury, 1920; but see Slaboch, 2018); not a value among others but the very *perspective of evaluation* from which the values of economic growth, civilisation, human development, moral betterment, industrialisation, human rights and technological innovation were derived. Never again, historian Eric Hobsbawm (1996, p. 269) once noted, 'was it to be so easy for blunt common sense, which knew in any case that the triumphal world of liberal capitalist progress was the best of all possible worlds, to mobilise the universe on behalf of its prejudices'. Yet not only was this best of all possible worlds (in Europe) reliant upon the value extraction and appropriation from the colonies and the Earth, shaping the world and its peoples – human and more – and their labour into homogeneous, fungible and scalable monocultures of production, trade and accumulation (Tsing, 2015). In relay and return, this progressive historicity and universal mode of evaluation had as its corollary the creation of a geopolitical 'hierarchy produced through a consideration of the best existing constitution or the state of scientific, technical, or economic development' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 238).

It was such a geography of anachronisms that enabled European colonialism to order, along a single diachronic line of progress and regress, other forms of life and sociality, other forms of knowledge, and other regions of the Earth – effectively conceiving of non-European peoples, like the cosmologies and stories by which they lived, as part of

Europe's past (Fabian, 1983; Hindess, 2008; Savransky, 2021a). Which is why, if the plane of historicity that 'progress' inaugurated served both to justify the imperial world-order and to absolve earth-wide colonial dispossession and devastation as the burden that modern societies had to accept and forcefully impose upon 'backward' peoples for *their* own sake, the decolonisation struggles of the 1950s and 1960s never managed to contest or displace the imperative of progress. In its stead, the march of progress carried on in the form of a world-system of postcolonial dependency and counter-insurgency that, under the aegis of humanitarian aid and the promotion of freedom and rights, established technocratic strategies and programmes of development to 'modernise' and bring about economic prosperity and social progress to the so-called Third World, progressively seeking to incorporate ever more remote communities into the world capitalist economy whilst turning every corner of the Earth into a 'resource' (Escobar, 1995).

Far from recoiling in the face of seemingly crumbling empires, it was precisely since the mid-twentieth century that the machinic forces of progress truly gathered pace and, with the shift from coal to oil, found a new gear, further entrenching its descent as much into our modes of valuation as into our modes of earthly habitation. Indeed, this is the period that environmental historians and scientists now refer to as 'The Great Acceleration', the period that has seen three-quarters of all anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide dumped into the atmosphere, that saw the numbers of motor vehicles around the planet swell by over 800 million, the period of the Cold War and of the nuclear arms race, the period of earth-wide urbanisation, of the three-hundred-fold multiplication of tons of plastic, of synthetic fertilisers and toxic treadmills, of mass dam constructions and exponential water use, of GDP growth and the tripling of the world population, of massive biodiversity loss, crippling global inequalities, of ocean acidification and rising global temperatures (see McNeill, 2001; McNeill & Engelke, 2014; Steffen et al., 2015).

What's more, even if the increasing alarm at the rising ecological vulnerabilities to which this history has given way makes the cruelties of the modern promise and project of progress perceptible with increasing force, and leads people in Europe and North America to report decreasing confidence in the standards of living of future generations (Pew Research Centre, 2017), it is not to the specious and profoundly questionable propositions of the likes of Steven Pinker and his acolytes that one may turn to find signs of progress's health. While it cannot be denied that the ecological maelstrom has shaken confidence in progress's promises, it cannot be accepted that it has simply withered away. Instead, it is precisely as much in the public sense of dread and loss at the possible inflection of progressive historicity with which the reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are received, as in the ever renewing promises of green reform and revolution (from green growth and the Green Industrial Revolution, to the Green New Deal and proposals for Ecological Civilisation [see Savransky, this issue]), that one may turn to notice that, in spite of all, progress insists and persists in the configuration of the present. With relentless insistence, it calls upon our beleaguered present just as it called 'to Kayerts from the river. Progress and civilization and all the virtues. Society . . . calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to return to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done' (Conrad, 2002, p. 24).

After progress: A revaluation of values

What, in light of the history that has fuelled what is a veritable progressive machine – as much an idea as an experience of historical time, as much a mode of evaluation as a geopolitical project of world-making – might it mean to think and live *after progress*? What might be at stake in affirming the possibility of learning to appraise the present otherwise, to make lives worth living and futures worth living for outside of progressive coordinates? And in one and the same breath: what are the terms of order, the evidences and the disqualifications such possibilities must question before they themselves can become perceptible? Born of the manifold propositions, exchanges and improvisational experiments that were nurtured during a symposium series on the theme of ‘After Progress’ in 2019 (generously funded by The Sociological Review Foundation) and further multiplied and extended in the digital exhibition of collaborative storytelling that accompanies this monograph (www.afterprogress.com), it is as much with these questions as with the multiple attendant problems and challenges that such questions pose to a variety of different areas, histories and concepts, that the contributions to this monograph seek to grapple, contend and experiment. Bringing together over 12 international scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and forms of expertise, as well as dozens of attendants and participants who joined in the discussion, the symposium explored the ruinous philosophical, political and ecological histories of modern progress. Together, we discussed the equally vibrant histories of criticism that emerged in response, as well as the manifold experiments, practices, stories, experiences, concepts, challenges and cosmo-visions of collective forms of life and thought in and out of Europe that render thinking and living after progress possible by the very fact that – in upending the historicist, colonial, developmental and extractivist logics of progress – this multitude of practices, stories and propositions have already undertaken it.

Indeed, if the contributions that make up this monograph can be considered divergent experiments in contending with these questions, it is because what they share is a sense that no response to such questions can rest content with a purely critical gesture that would point to the evident flaws in the very *idea* of progress so as to pursue its ‘reconstruction’ (cf. Wagner, 2016), or to seek critical satisfaction in the reiteration of the important and already well-articulated denunciations of progress’s Eurocentric colonialism, impoverished historicism, rationalistic hubris and ecocidal extractivism (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Gudynas, 2021). Such critical connections are vital, and they provide the starting point for many of the pages that follow. But if this briefest of sketches of progress’s stranglehold on our political imaginations can teach us anything, it is that progress has never been merely ‘ideal’, that it has constituted a veritable manner of ploughing the world, of shaping our modes of collective valuation and earthly habitation. Indeed, from the prospects of boundless economic growth, to the slogans of ‘Build Back Better’ in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, through to the promises of reform of what we have come to call ‘progressive’ politics, the restless promises of progress, the metaphysical optimism with which the modern experience of history has been infused, have come to epitomise that particular kind of ‘affectively stunning double bind’ the late Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 51) would call ‘cruel optimism’: one that constitutes, at one and the same time, ‘a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding

to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent'. And, by itself, mere critique is no cure for that.

As Amy Allen's (2016) recent decolonial study of 'critical theory' and Sanjay Seth's (this issue) problematisation of the circular imbrication between claims to knowledge and promises of progress powerfully suggest, the project of critique – or that project, at least, whose form is most immediately recognisable in the work of those who have advanced the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory – is by no means immune to such affectively stunning double-binds but rather fuels them whenever the inheritance of the Enlightenment from which 'critique' itself springs does not simultaneously 'deploy critique in the service of criticizing and undermining Enlightenment's own Eurocentrism and thus its ongoing entanglements with the coloniality of power' (Allen, 2016, p. 204). Indeed, when it becomes perceptible that, far from universal, the transcendental appeals to reason and knowledge on which certain critical traditions rest are inextricable from the provincialism of a Western, modern culture that has harboured global aspirations and pursued them through colonial domination and epistemological disqualification (Seth, 2021), the contemporary standard-bearers of critical theory seek at every turn to resist 'the false conclusion that the criteria of reason themselves change with every new context' (Habermas, 2001, pp. 148–149). Which is why they avail themselves of what Seth (this issue) describes as a circular strategy. One that, in connecting 'the superiority of modern western knowledge' to 'the superiority of modernity as a social phenomenon', presupposes what it seeks to explain. Far from emancipating us from the illusions of progress, therefore, critique can often perpetuate a cruel optimism of its own – at once binding itself to fantasies of social and moral progress whose colonial foundations block the satisfactions they offer, and binding the politics of emancipation to the promises of the Enlightenment tradition that such fantasies have come to represent.

The making of critical connections that always bind the imperative of progress to the forces of oppression, domination and extraction remains vital to the multifarious contributions to this monograph. But such connections function less as vehicles for enlightenment than as vectors of conceptual and political indetermination. They seek to upend modern foundations and loosen progress's grip on our imaginations so as to experiment with the possibility of inhabiting the present otherwise; to wager – against all odds – on the chance of rendering ourselves capable of thinking, living and imagining for other times to come, for worlds to be otherwise composed (Savransky, 2021b). Indeed, to say that progress has become not merely a modern value among others but the very perspective of evaluation from which values – of growth, emancipation, civilisation, human development, moral betterment, industrialisation, human rights and technological innovation – are derived, is to recall with Friedrich Nietzsche (1990) that a critique of established values and facts is never enough. That is, critique is never enough unless it also pursues, and seeks to precipitate, a radical transformation of that differential element, that perspective of appraisal and evaluation, from which the very value of those values is derived. After all, the very imperative of progress makes present that, as Gilles Deleuze (2006, p. 2) put it with reference to Nietzsche, 'we always have the beliefs, feelings and thoughts that we deserve given our way of being and our style of life'. And as such, it is never enough to think our way into another way of being, but *we must learn to live our way into other modes of thinking* (Savransky, 2021a, p. 275).

Yet precisely because we always have the beliefs, thoughts and values we deserve given our ways of being and our styles of life, the imperative of progress is one we cannot live with but do not know how to live without. As such, to live one's way into other modes of thinking outside of the modern stories of progress is to confront the fact that, without such stories, the 'ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment', that it is 'not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction' (Tsing, 2015, p. 282). Which is why the reevaluation of values involved in thinking and living 'after progress' requires not only the critical assessment of established values but also, and above all, a much riskier, uncertain and speculative art of creating and experimenting with other perspectives of evaluation and other modes of habitation, of affirming and nurturing forms of social life at odds with the progressive times. Such, indeed, is the art of those Nietzsche (1990, §211) called 'the philosophical labourers', who are not to be 'confused with philosophers' but are instead those on whose steps the philosopher follows: labourers are the 'critic and sceptic and dogmatist and historian and, in addition, poet and collector and traveller and reader of riddles and moralist and seer and "free spirit" and practically everything'. They are those who traverse 'the whole range of human values and value-feelings' and render themselves able 'to gaze from the heights into every distance, from the depths into every height, from the nook-and-corner into every broad expanse with manifold eyes and a manifold conscience', but do not do so with the purpose of establishing transcendental principles, or to discover universal truths.

The task of those whom Nietzsche calls the philosophical and scientific labourers, rather, is to '*create values*'. They are the ones who 'reach for the future with creative hand, and everything that is or has been becomes for them a means, an instrument, a hammer'. Their labour is the labour of those who refuse, in spite of all, to give to the stories of progress the power to inform even our own stories of ruination. Their art is the art of those who are prepared to take the risk of philosophising with a hammer or a tuning fork, not simply to smash the idols of progress but to affirm that, even at this time of socioecological devastation and perilous political repatterning, there are practical and conceptual propositions, political interstices and social undercurrents, a profusion of minor stories, earthly experiments, speculative propositions, and insistent possibilities, that proffer generative contributions to the questions of how we might understand and effect change, learn to live and die well with others, and make other worlds possible, when we no longer rely on the modern coordinates of progress as either our horizon or our home.

What would it take to refuse the promise of a horizon that renders the devastation of social and environmental ecologies the price freedom, security and prosperity must pay for their own realisation on Earth? What flights of political experimentation might be opened up in the rejection of the consolations proffered by those who find amidst disaster the signs of a universality to come, the solace of a new civilisation, of a good common world to be finally composed? What would be involved in refusing to let the rise of environmental reflexivity become the new name for the progressive imperative? Which improvised forms of organisation might be engendered outside the prospect of redemption, across the line that marks the limit of modern conceptions of justice? Which collective projects of activism and resurgence might be nurtured in the incommensurability between grief and grievance, loss and compensation? What forms of democracy might

spring forth in the surrounds of the progressive state, in the unruly appositions of progress and regress, salvation and damnation? What might get underway in the ongoing and unfinished struggles to make lives and worlds on unstable ecological terrain, to learn to live and die well if not always better?

Progress asunder: Knowledges, histories and aesthetics otherwise

The invitation to imagine an ‘after’ to that which was meant to have no afters, of stepping outside the imperative of progress and experimenting from its ruins rather than labouring reconstructively in its shadow, necessarily calls for a profusion of divergent wagers, of singular attempts, of *essays* in the etymological sense of the word. It is a provocation to grapple with perilous possibilities one faintly envisages but cannot fully understand, creating values whose intensity one savours but whose value remains as yet unsettled, contending with problems one senses but has not yet learned how to pose. It is a radical call for the plural, a gamble on one and many openings to the otherwise and to the outside. And if this is so it is not least because the march of modern progress brought with it nothing short of a ‘great singularisation and simplification’, seeking to turn the world into a single order by drawing other temporalities of social life into its rhythms, such that ‘Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions (*les progrès*, the plural) and from the diversity of revolutions, “The Revolution” emerged’ (Koselleck, 2014, p. 35).

Nurturing the heterogeneous as heterogeneous, the *essays* that compose this monograph do not, therefore, contribute to a would-be collective work of composing a common world in which the spectre of progress would have been reduced to a faint memory, or thrown, like The Revolution once hoped to do, the long progressive present into the dustbin of history. What they instead pursue is a multiplicity of situated openings, of ongoing and unfinished struggles, picking holes in the progressive whole so as to precipitate heterogeneous openings to a profusion of divergent milieus. In some cases, these struggles concern the incisive interrogation of the histories, ideas, evidences and disqualifications that must be questioned for the very possibility of an opening to become perceptible. In this regard, Seth’s article provides a backdrop to many other speculative explorations in the monograph by offering a lucid critique of the persistent defences of progress amongst critical theorists. Focusing on the relations between knowledge and progress, mentioned above, he examines the manner in which social and political thinkers like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, among others, have sought to defend their faith in the universality of modern progress and knowledge in the wake of the many counter-attempts to historicise and provincialise modern epistemic foundations thereby upending the very grounds on which the ‘fact’ of progress can come to be asserted. What Seth finds in his examination of these and other thinkers is that, despite certain ‘concessions’ about the necessary ‘impurity’ of reason, the imperative of progress and the presupposition of the universality of modern knowledge nevertheless insist and persist in their work. Illuminating the pitfalls involved in such attempts at upping the ante of progress and knowledge, Seth instead leads us to confront a present in which ‘we are

possessed of an acute consciousness of the historicity of our knowledge, but without any compelling argument for its superiority to other knowledges'. And given that modern knowledge has been the means of establishing the fact of progress, he invites us 'to ask what can be thought, and what is to be done, after we have dispensed with the idea of progress'.

It is precisely such dispensation that Andrea Bardin and Marco Ferrari pursue in their attempt to move past the intimate connections between the modern idea of progress and a homeostatic conception of social organisation, one only radicalised by neoliberal forms of social regulation. Engaging with the development of this homeostatic politics of regulation through an examination of the historical importance of cybernetics in modern culture, they seek to problematise the manner in which it has reduced both, reality to a series of 'calculable structures', and science to the very operation of calculation. Interrogating what cybernetics leaves unquestioned in order to push the homeostatic imaginary out of bounds, Bardin and Ferrari draw on the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon, and his concept of metastability, in order to seek an after to cybernetics in the possibility of reclaiming 'progress' in non-teleological and non-deterministic ways, as a politics far from equilibrium where the very openness to social and political invention is at stake.

Submitting the very idea of 'progress' to the understanding of complexity, far-from-equilibrium systems and non-linear dynamics that progressive histories of science would argue were themselves a product of scientific progress is the focus of Craig Lundy's essay. Drilling down into the detail of key complexity terms that are often glossed in the literature, as if their meaning and profundity were self-evident, Lundy seeks to isolate the conceptual elements that are 'doing the work' when it comes to the deviation of the complexity framework from the dominant scientific paradigms complicit in the modern idea of progress. While it is certainly possible for the complexity gambit to be placed under the thumb of modern progress – a fate that some complexity scholars are even fine with – the suggestion here is that if the philosophical implications of a properly complex cosmology are taken seriously, then this should indicate avenues for rethinking the idea of progress, and more specifically the *form* of this idea, enabling in turn an evasion of the presiding modern rendition of progress as 'betterment'.

A shared matter of concern across the essays that compose the monograph is the need to speculatively probe forms of organisation – of organisms, of collectives, of knowledges, of thoughts, of the Earth – that affirm the possibility of flourishing without presupposing the horizon of betterment or reinforcing the imperative progress. It is the immediate urgency of this which becomes particularly poignant in Lara Choksey's socio-literary exploration of and beyond what she calls 'the epidemiological plot', in which 'human powers of causality – and technological dominance over organic processes – are latched to a residual teleological hinge shared across liberal and communitarian futurisms, with progress displacing divine purpose with natural cause, scientism displacing style with fact, and research consortia displacing men of letters'. As Choksey argues, the effects of the epidemiological plot are as much historical as they are scientific, as much political as they are literary – they concern the very forms and genres of organisation by which certain kinds of knowledges, narratives and sociopolitical temporalities are orchestrated. Taking as her starting point the destitutive cry ('I can't breathe!') that in the summer of 2020 conjoined the crises of COVID-19 and police brutality against

Black lives and gave way to a mode of politics and aesthesis of urgency ‘that simultaneously holds and bypasses the possibility of achieving a just end’, Choksey develops a pensive and sustained engagement with the epistolary genre as she seeks to attend to the orchestration of non-progressive forms of organisation – in literature as in politics – that flesh out and bypass ‘the repeated disappointments of the plot of progress (the possibility of a universal cure) to bring an end to the protracted and deadening distress of the present’.

Unmaking progress: Natures, cultures and the politics of scale

The attempt to sidestep the political and cultural plot progress whilst contending with the protracted disappointments of the present is further addressed and developed, in an ethnographic key, in the essay by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. Indeed, focusing on the protracted story of the mountain of Tindaya since its designation as the site for artist Eduardo Chillida’s *Monument to Tolerance* that drew it into the anticipatory rhythm of the prospect of prosperity that such cultural and touristic development would bring, Marrero-Guillamón’s essay is situated precisely in the temporalities of ‘limbo’ that characterise a present truncated in the hold of a promise of progress that never arrives. Promised in the mid-1990s, the making of *Monument for Tolerance* remains ‘suspended, neither in construction nor abandoned’. Following the complex tangle of traces conjoining mining, modernist art and heritage preservation that are held in this suspension, Marrero-Guillamón explores how ideas of linear time, endless growth and inexorable advancement have shaped the relationship between people, indigeneity and land. But his is also a speculative ethnography, appraising Tindaya itself as an unintended monument to the ruins of modernity whilst affirming the possibility of enacting other, minoritarian futures, connected to the poorly understood indigenous lifeworlds attached to the mountain and its surroundings.

Indeed, Marrero-Guillamón’s speculative ethnography also reminds us that the possibility of thinking and living after progress confronts us anew with the concept and politics of scale. And if this is so, it is not least because the quality making ‘projects expand without changing their framing assumptions’ that Anna Tsing (2015, p. 38) has called ‘scalability’ has been not only ‘a hallmark of modern knowledge’ but also one of the defining powers of the progressive machine, promoting ‘smooth expansion’ by rendering every element ‘oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter’ thereby banishing ‘meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things’. But this is also to say that, while non-progressive forms of organisation and imagination might be – thankfully – unable to smoothly ‘scale up’, a critique of the notion of scale does not make scalability wither away. The politics of scale makes it frighteningly felt that progress is both something we cannot live with but do not know how to live without, and this becomes remarkably perceptible in the respective essays by Henrietta Moore and Juan Manuel Moreno, and by Dimitris Papadopoulos. Indeed, the problem that Moore and Moreno seek to grapple with is precisely that of imagining food systems and forms of agriculture after progress. Contemporary food systems, they argue, have been built on the scalable pursuit of productivity and efficiency through the deployment of ever newer technological

means, including mechanisation, non-organic fertilisers and chemicals. In the case of modern agricultural systems, the goal is to extract the maximum yield per hectare and to drive down costs. Examining how the march of agricultural progress at once leads to rising levels of toxicity, declining biodiversity, and to the devastation of other agricultural practices and forms of working and inhabiting the land, Moore and Moreno attend to the trials and tribulations of agroecological approaches deployed to remediate these rifts, at once acknowledging its potential and warning against the creeping up of progressive horizons in the very efforts of remediation that much too quickly become ‘scalable’ thereby ignoring that every agroecological intervention forms ‘a specific assemblage of plants, people, soil, fertiliser, technologies, animals, fences, and infrastructures both material and social’.

And if food systems render the imbrications of progress and scales irreducibly problematic, nowhere is this more evident than in the earth-wide suffusion of anthropogenic chemicals. For as Dimitris Papadopoulos reminds us in his essay on the ecological politics of chemical practice, we are all implicated by scale: much like progress itself, anthropogenic chemicals have suffused the Earth to the point where life amidst them, through them, is at once impossible and inevitable. As such, he argues, political ecological struggles after progress are inextricably bound to grapple with the problem of scale, at once as a source of ecological degradation and as a necessary component of many efforts of remediation. Which is why, rather than a dismissal of questions of scale, Papadopoulos seeks an opening for ecological reparation in the possibility of ‘scaling out’: of commoning social and planetary boundaries through divergently connected experiments implicating amateur scientists, indigenous knowledge practitioners, clandestine chemists, DIY biochemists, university researchers in green and sustainable chemistry, remediation ecologists, biodegradable designs, underground labs and interspecies collaborations. None of these experiments, however, ‘make[s] progress’. They do not prefigure the coming about of a global politics of sweeping societal change. Yet perhaps, just perhaps, they might be enough ‘to defend and maintain the life of communities facing socio-ecological conflict and destruction’.

After progress, perhaps

Perhaps! It is not to the great pronouncements of the coming about of a new epoch, not to the advent of a new global civilisation, that one is given over in the attempt to think and live after progress. It is to a precarious and interstitial *perhaps*, to the irreducible possibility of sensing and trusting the insistence of an indeterminate otherwise, the dim intensity of minor openings that might, just perhaps, inspire in us other sensibilities and other values, other habits and practices sustained in the undercurrents and undersides that manifold stories and experiments make exist (Savransky, 2021a, 2021b). ‘But who is willing to concern himself with such dangerous perhapses! For that’, Nietzsche (1990, §2) speculated, ‘we have to await the arrival of a new species of philosopher, one which possesses tastes and inclinations opposite to and different from those of its predecessors – philosophers of the dangerous “perhaps” in every sense. – And to speak in all seriousness: I see such philosophers arising.’ Thinking after progress is labouring in the hold of dangerous perhapses, without warrants or guarantees, risking a revaluation of values in a

perilous and precarious present neither destined for a bright future nor certain to be damned, not knowing if such philosophers have, in fact, finally arrived, but labouring regardless to create openings through which one and many perhaps might pass.

And if the dangers of perhaps are perceptible throughout the monograph, their force and power to upend the terms of order only become stronger and louder. For indeed, as Krithika Srinivasan asks in her essay on zoöpolitics after progress, perhaps the socioecological impasse of progress and development to bring about greater prosperity and well-being to humankind cannot be disentangled from the profound anthropocentrism and speciesism with which the very concept and value of 'wellbeing' has been inscribed. Even when 'the idea that humankind is ontologically a part of nature is widely accepted', she nevertheless notes that such conceptual acceptance in no way has challenged the human exceptionalism that renders 'unimaginable that humans should live like other animals: with shorter life-spans perhaps, and unsupported by the infrastructures of commercial agriculture, medicine, and engineering that currently insulate many people from the vulnerabilities that are inherent to being a part of nature, including being killed by other animals for food or safety'. Labouring under the possibility of countering the zoöpolitics of progress and development, Srinivasan therefore experiments with a revaluation of what 'being well' might entail were it to become a matter not of anthropocentric exception and protection but of multispecies inception and justice.

Another radical revaluation gets underway in Martin Savransky's essay on what he calls 'ecological uncivilisation'. Responding to the proposition that learning to live in the Anthropocene might require that we learn how to die, Savransky examines the way in which the imperative of progress – and its double, civilisation – persists today in the form of a new ecological reflexivity devoted to the global reorganisation of societies towards just, socioecological transitions beyond the techno-fixes of geoengineering, green growth and their ostensible promises of modern progress. Through a sustained interrogation of the proposal for 'ecological civilisation', developed conceptually by a number of process philosophers and theologians and lately adopted as a guiding policy framework by the Chinese government in its shift to an ecological (geo)politics, Savransky shows that while such a call rejects the substantive values of modern progress, its regulative notion of civilisation retains the modern story of progress as a mode of valuation and therefore reinscribes imperial, colonial values at the heart of ecology. Refusing to submit to a story of progress after progress whilst thinking in the hold of perhaps so as to expand our political imagination, Savransky instead experiments with the possibility that learning to die might well entail learning to live without the concept and ideal of civilisation. Such, indeed, is his plea for 'ecological uncivilisation', a proposal to give oneself over to a permanent experimentation with 'improbable forms of world-making and methodologies of life that are articulated thanks to the earth-wide precariousness that calls them into action and not in spite of them; that are envisaged thanks to ongoing histories of decolonisation and not despite them; that strive to live and die well but not always better'.

Indeed, if such experimentations with inhabiting the Earth after progress, otherwise, are possible at all it is not least because the Earth itself is what Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski call a 'planetary multiplicity': a self-differentiating planet with the propensity to shift between multiple operating states, thereby opening up novel possibilities for understanding the many differences discernible in our own species, the many multitudes

that compose and inhabit it. Advancing this speculative dialectics of planetary multiplicities and earthly multitudes, they find an unexpected – and surely controversial – motley crew of allies in a certain post-Hegelian tradition that has paid attention to the ‘internal disjunctures’ that run through both the history of humans and the history of the Earth, thereby disrupting the imperium of modern European thought whilst pursuing the possibility that, perhaps, our interventions, which are ‘part of the self-making of the world, are inevitably adventures in asynchronicity – or rather that the judgment of their timeliness is never wholly in our hands’.

It is because the efficacy of any intervention is never in one’s hands that any generative experiment in intervening, in getting in between the multifarious forces, dreams, hopes and fears that make up this ongoing and unfinished world, requires to be performed with the trust of a held-out hand. Through a speculative engagement with the pragmatist philosophy of William James, it is precisely this task which Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers enjoin us to accept: that of the cultivation of practices that may enable us to participate in a regeneration of ecologies of trust, of ways of living that affirm interdependence in a hostile environment just as they resist the ‘thinning down of the world’ brought about by progress’s homogenising advance. Suggesting that ‘the risk of trust, when it bears on interdependence, is not between two individuals, but must take on a meaning that is collectively experienced as such’, Debaise and Stengers are concerned with the collective fabrication, after progress, of generative devices which in breaking with the ideal of scalability and with the thinning abstractions of progress can perhaps give way to modes of assembly and assemblage that both presuppose and induce its participants’ recursive capacity to make sense in common about situations that concern them. ‘We need’, they argue, ‘to cultivate a fabric of sociality that transforms our claims into practical stories of becoming with each other, thanks to each other and at the risk of each other.’

Together, therefore, the contributions that make up this monograph just as they unmake the workings of progress create neither a blueprint for a post-progressive future nor the contemporary grounds for the kind of impotent attitude and mode of attunement that, Nietzsche would argue, breeds nothing but *ressentiment*: an attunement to the reasons that would justify our contempt for the present, our contempt for the world. Indeed, the challenge of learning to think and live *after* progress is precisely that, because we always have the values we deserve, no after to progress is to be found in its shadows, in the articulation of symmetrically opposed stances, in the designs of blueprints for a future that, finally freed from growth, from techno-scientific advance, from capitalist extraction, would at last be well and truly ‘better’. Affirming the inchoate and interstitial character of the ‘perhaps’, the space without promises that teems with many an insistent otherwise, what they labour towards, what they strive for instead as they once again make an enemy of ‘the ideal of today’ (Nietzsche, 1990, §212), is to create values, to hazard tools, stories and propositions that may one day open the present up to a multiplicity of becomings, to other tomorrows and to days after tomorrow that – assuming there should be such days – might inspire in us, whoever this ‘us’ might be, the beliefs, feelings, values, thoughts and imaginations that we would like to deserve according to the divergent styles of life and modes of being that are in the process of making themselves felt on the margins and in the ruins of progress.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the continuous support, advice and inspiration of many colleagues and friends who have in different ways contributed to the development of this project, including Steve Brown, Claire Blencowe, Barbara Glowczewski, Elizabeth Povinelli, Iris van der Tuin and Daniela Voss. Our thanks also go to the many participants who attended the *After Progress* symposium series for the thoughtful questions and contributions. Last but not least, our sincere thanks go to *The Sociological Review*, whose ongoing support of this project has made this monograph possible.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Allen, A. (2016). *The end of progress: Decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bury, J. B. (1920). *The idea of progress: An inquiry into its origin and growth*. Macmillan and Co.
- Bowler, P. (2017). *A history of the future: Prophets of progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov*. Cambridge University Press.
- Charbonnier, P. (2021). *Affluence and freedom: An environmental history of political ideas*. Polity Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Conrad, J. (2002). *Heart of darkness and other tales*. Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (2006). *Nietzsche and philosophy*. Bloomsbury.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton University Press.
- Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press.
- Ferguson, J. (1994). *The anti-politics machine: Development, depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gudynas, E. (2021). *Extractivisms: Politics, economy, and ecology*. Columbia University Press.
- Habermas, J. (2001). *The postnational constellation*. Polity.
- Hindess, B. (2008). Been there, done that. . . . *Postcolonial Studies*, 11(2), 201–213.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1996). *The age of capital: 1848–1875*. Random House.
- Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures past: On the semantics of historical time*. Columbia University Press.
- McNeill, J. R. (2001). *Something new under the sun: An environmental history of the twentieth century*. Penguin.
- McNeill, J. R., & Engelke, P. (2014). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1990). *Beyond good and evil: Prelude to a philosophy of the future*. Penguin.
- Nisbet, R. (1980). *History of the idea of progress*. Heinemann.
- Pew Research Centre. (2017, June 5). *Global publics more upbeat about the economy: But many are pessimistic about children's future*. www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/Pew-Research-Center-Economy-Report-FINAL-June-5-2017-UPDATED.pdf
- Savransky, M. (2021a). After progress: Notes for an ecology of perhaps. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organisation*, 21(1), 267–281.

- Savransky, M. (2021b). *Around the day in eighty worlds: Politics of the pluriverse*. Duke University Press.
- Seth, S. (2021). *Beyond reason: Postcolonial theory and the social sciences*. Oxford University Press.
- Slaboch, M. (2018). *A road to nowhere: The idea of progress and its critics*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Steffen, W., Broadgate, W., Deutsch, L., Gaffney, O., & Ludwig, C. (2015). The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The great acceleration. *The Anthropocene Review*, 2(1), 81–98.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Wagner, P. (2016). *Progress: A reconstruction*. Polity Press.

Author biographies

Martin Savransky is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he convenes the MA Ecology, Culture & Society. He is the author of *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics of the Pluriverse* (Duke University Press, 2021) and *The Adventure of Relevance: An Ethics of Social Inquiry* (Palgrave, 2016), and the co-editor of *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures* (Routledge, 2017). Working in the interstices between philosophy and the social sciences, his interests include pragmatism, radical pluralism, postcolonial thought, speculative practices, and methodologies of life on unstable ecological terrain.

Craig Lundy is a Reader in Social and Political Thought at London Metropolitan University. The majority of his research has been concerned with exploring the nature of transformational processes, in particular the role that history plays in shaping sociopolitical formations. Much of this research has focused on the work of Gilles Deleuze and the post-Kantian lineage (e.g. Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson), however he has also conducted applied research using the principles of complexity theory/science to examine a range of issues including the formation of community identity, the pedagogy of ‘service-learning’ and the processes of public engagement. Craig is the author of *Deleuze’s Bergsonism, History and Becoming: Deleuze’s Philosophy of Creativity*, and he co-edited with Daniela Voss the collection *At the Edges of Thought: Deleuze and Post-Kantian Philosophy*, all published by Edinburgh University Press.