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Chapter 16

Political Progress

Piecemeal, Pragmatic, and Processual

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Are we witnessing progress or regress in the recent increasing popularity and electoral success of populist politicians and parties in consolidated democratic nations? On the one hand, populism could be seen as a progressive change in sclerotic democratic regimes run by popularly insulated elites who are themselves largely captured by major organs of social power. For flowering populism is associated both with increasing political participation among previously quietistic and apathetic citizens and with state policy reorientation away from the preferences and interests of the rich few and towards those of the many. On the other hand, we might take the rise of populism as a form of political regress, more specifically as a distinct pathological danger that representative democracies are endemically in danger of giving rise to. On this reading (my preferred reading), populism is inherently anti-pluralistic since populists politicians and parties claim to be the single and exclusive representative of the true will of the true demos, while denying any popular legitimacy for any political competitors or alternative views (Müller 2016; Zurn forthcoming). Populism is then a regressive use of electoral democracy to undermine pluralistic democracy.

Consider questions about changes in our political institutions, specifically in a direction towards increasingly democratic forms of constitutionalism. Is the innovative use of popular referendum in Great Britain to settle fundamental constitutional questions a progressive or regressive innovation? To be sure, it will be difficult to separate one's assessment here from one's take on the substance of Brexit, but there is a distinctive kind of institutional assessment involved here, one that we would like to be able to answer in order to understand and guide future changes in British political institutions and norms – as well as other representative democracies.[1] Similarly, is the increasing use of constituent assemblies to change constitutions across the

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world evidence of progress in democratic constitutionalism, or, a worryingly regressive change back towards unmediated popular majoritarianism? On the one hand, from the point of view of democratic theory, constituent assemblies appear to promise what other modes of constitutional change cannot: a way in which democratic citizens can best understand themselves as authors of the very laws they are subject to. On that account, they represent political progress in the long history of experimentation in the institutions of constitutional democracy. On the other hand, the performance of actual constituent assemblies have not always appeared to move democratic constitutionalism forward – quite the opposite in some cases. The leading example of such regression is of course Venezuela, where the Maduro regime has employed a constituent assembly to effectively bypass representative democracy and establish a one-party authoritarian regime. Other examples of constituent assemblies range from milder failures – for example, Bolivia from 2007 to 2009 – to successes in democratic constitutionalism – for example, Brazil in 1986–1988 and Iceland in 2009–2012. We might then say that the institutional innovation of contemporary constituent assemblies over the past thirty years is potentially progressive, but at the same time potentially regressive insofar as it risks being used in the service of democratic deconsolidation (Zurn 2016a).

This chapter reflects on some of the perils and promise of framing such questions with the conceptual couplet of progress and regress. It considers four compelling critiques of the use of "progress" and its cognates in socio-political theory, as well as arguing that such concepts are nevertheless ineliminable for our normative theories. The paper concludes by suggesting that we can avoid the most serious problems by employing only conceptions of political progress and regress that are piecemeal, pragmatic, and processual.

THREE KNOCKS ON PROGRESS

When we reflect on social and political changes the language of progress and regress is a familiar rhetoric, an easy idiom, for couching basic normative assessments of successive states of affairs as either better or worse. Perhaps more importantly, invocations of progress or regress also introduce into political discussions crucial affective and motivational content: we hope for progress and recoil from regress, and, we are spurred to action by both the promise of progress and the threat of regress. Thus to adopt this particular idiom is not merely to make anodyne and distanced normative comparisons between two different states of affairs. It is also simultaneously to urge needed change and impel progressive (or anti-regressive) political action, all in the light of the reasonable hope that the world can be changed for the better. In this register, progress is a concept tied closely to political hope: it is not just an evaluation

of past developments but also a call to contribute to an improved future.[2] Despite quite divergent starting points and disparate accounts of the meaning and entailments of progress, recent literature has seen a minor explosion of philosophical theories of progress in the register of hope: a small sample includes Buchanan and Powell (2018), Kitcher (2011), and Singer (2011).

Right alongside this hopeful employment of the idiom of progress, however, is a contrasting set of discourses arguing that invocations of progress are fatally discredited factually, morally disreputable, and perniciously ideological in effect. First, appeals to progress appear to be intellectually discredited: musty remnants of grand nineteenth-century philosophies of history that were themselves foundationally grounded in grand metaphysical systems that are no longer convincing. From left to right, and from poststructuralists to philosophical anthropologists – and much in between – beliefs in or even hopes for progress are seen as fatally tied to quaint and rose-tinted misreadings of actual history, misreadings purportedly grounded in fundamental human nature and the lawlike tendencies of history. Yet such grand legitimating metanarratives of civilizational progress have been discredited along with their foundationalist justifications, thereby ceding both their cognitive believability and their morally orienting power (Lyotard 1984; Wagner 2016). Said otherwise, even as the notion of progress was put forward as an Enlightenment rebuttal of religious myths of history, belief in progress can itself be seen as a mythic secularization of teleological thinking. It is then no surprise that a general loss of the power of faith puts both forms of eschatological myths out to pasture simultaneously: traditional religions no less than the story of inevitable human improvement (Gray 2014).

Furthermore, the critique is not merely of the purported facts underlying the myth of progress, for many think talk of progress is, simply, morally disreputable in the light of the horrors witnessed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "After Auschwitz … not only every positive doctrine of progress but every assertion that history has *meaning* has become problematic and affirmative. … Any appeal to the idea of progress would seem absurd given the scale of the catastrophe" (Adorno 2006, 4).[3] The thought is that it is simply morally obscene to use the categories of progress when the very societies that have self-consciously thought of themselves as progressive have carried out mass atrocities on an unprecedented scale and thereby committed evils never before conceivable. The uncomfortableness is made particularly acute once we note that specific societies' self-congratulations in the form of progressivism – as the cultural heights of German *Bildung,* as the technological dynamism of liberal capitalism in the United States, and as the utopia of fully egalitarian communism in the Soviet Union – are all simultaneously directly pairable with unspeakable evils – the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons on civilians, and the gulag archipelago.

The third critique of the progress/regress couplet takes the thought of morally disreputable self-congratulation one step further, seeing myths of progress as not only fallacious and morally blind, but also as ideological rationalizations of and covers for institutional practices of exploitation, domination, and oppression. Well explored in critical social theory, the idea is that the high rhetoric of progress and especially human development have been repeatedly used by European and American nation-states to distract from or even positively rationalize their colonial and imperial exploits, particularly to cover over the brutal character of their racialized exploitation, oppression, and domination of non-Western peoples and resources (Allen 2016; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; McCarthy 2009). "As James Tully has pithily put the point, the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people" (Allen 2016, 3).[4]

THE INELIMINABILITY OF PROGRESS
(AND A FOURTH KNOCK)

Despite these three critiques of progress as disreputable, discredited, and ideological, I would contend that progress is nevertheless an ineliminable concept for normative political thinking. To begin, there are examples of political change that, quite simply, are undeniably progressive. Consider the nineteenth-century demise of the various legal, social, and economic institutions of the race-based Atlantic chattel slave trade system. That system was ended through both violent and peaceful means in those nations that had themselves pioneered the imperial and colonial conquests that undergirded the international slave trade from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Surely the abolition of slavery counts as progress. Just as surely, we would not hesitate to condemn the reintroduction of slavery as political regress. Isn't it similarly obvious that the enfranchisement of women counts as political progress in those nations that had understood themselves as democracies and yet had limited the vote only to men? Indeed it is precisely cases like these that lie behind most of Buchanan and Powell's responses to historical pessimists, those who see only moral degeneration in Western societies over time. "With a little reflection, the denial of moral progress seems absurd … [f]or shining examples of moral progress are not hard to come by" (2018, 2), including in their list not only emancipatory changes involving slavery and women's rights, but also the transformations in the treatment of non-human animals, cruelty in punishments, and citizen-responsive government.

Furthermore, progress is conceptually appealing, perhaps even unavoidable, for comprehending our normative orderings in general. If you have

normative standards of any kind – values, norms, rules, principles, and so on – you invoke a measurement that reality can live up to or not. And once put into a temporal register, normative assessment of changes simply means measuring progress or regress. Like "good" and "bad" or "right" and "wrong," the couplet of "progress" and "regress" – along with its cognates and synonyms – is nearly unavoidable language when we are engaged in activities across a range of evaluative orders: morality, legality, ethics, self-understanding, politics, and even aesthetics. Of course, progress is ineliminable *for us,* we who have ineradicably taken on a modern time consciousness that understands change as non-cyclical and cumulative and so sees history as a meaningful sequence of transformations, where past, present, and future demarcate meaningfully different domains causally linking significant changes (Habermas 1987, 1–22). And this modern consciousness of linear time is fostered by the increasingly capacious achievements of scientific and technical endeavours, where changes over time seem best comprehended in terms of learning, of progress: the story of successive moments is a story of each cognitive accomplishment building onto and out of previous cognitive accomplishments. There are surely societies without modern time consciousness who have no need for the concept of progress – it is quite hard to make the case that progress was an *ineliminable* evaluative concept in Plato, Aristotle, or fifth-century BCE Athens more broadly. But given that we ourselves can't think historically without thinking of change and transformation, we also can't help but evaluate such changes with the language of whether we are moving forward or moving backward, whether that change is good or bad from the point of view of improvement or backsliding – that is, without the language of progress and regress.

Perhaps this is why some of the strongest critics of progress as discredited, disreputable, and ideological nevertheless pull their punches and, in the end, attempt to rehabilitate some chastened, modest, non-ideological, and thereby reputable concept of progress. For instance, after launching a rather withering attack on grand Enlightenment discourses celebrating inevitable human progress for being factually unbelievable discourses today – as thoroughly discredited – Peter Wagner suggests we ought nevertheless to retain a less grandiose conception of progress, one that is more granular in its judgements, that rejects claims of inevitability, that refuses to link together developments in different domains of social life, and that is more open to critique, agency, and imagination as motors of decent change. He recommends, in other words, that we both reject Enlightenment notions of progress and embrace a reconstructed notion of progress (Wagner 2016).

Thomas McCarthy's critique of progress brings together the charges of moral disrepute and ideology and yet still recommends recuperation. With case studies on Kant, Mill, social Darwinism, and modernization theory,

he elegantly makes the case that the institutional realizations of racism and imperialism that have been central to the world order for the last four centuries are in fact conceptually linked to various discourses of progress. "From the settlement of the Americas and the formation of the East India and Royal African Companies in the seventeenth century to present-day neoimperialism, European (and later, American) dominion over non-Europeans has repeatedly been justified with conceptions of development, enlightenment, civilization and progress, which were deployed to reduce the cognitive dissonance between liberal universalism and liberal imperialism" (McCarthy 2009, 166). Yet McCarthy insists – rightly I think – that the family concepts of progress, development, and historical enlightenment are "both indispensable and dangerous," such that "there is no alternative to [their] ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction" (McCarthy 2009, 18). Progress on this account is what I have elsewhere called (inspired by McCarthy) an "illusionistic ideal": an ideal that is indispensable for normative reasons and yet deeply worthy of suspicion for empirical reasons of actual historical practice (Zurn 2013). Illusionistic ideals are systematically ambiguous, presenting with a Janus face: worthy of both endorsement and sceptical dismissal. Note that there are methodological entailments of taking illusionistic political ideals seriously: we then need sociopolitical theory that combines in a more or less systematic way normative analysis and empirical research. Just as it is not enough to simply examine the normativity of the ideal at issue, it is not enough to study the uses and abuses that concept has been put to in actual practice.

Such an idea of theory systematically combining empirical and normative elements – plus a firm commitment to human emancipation – is of course an identifying hallmark of critical social theory. Unsurprisingly, the progress/regress couplet has been virtually ineliminable from the core of critical social theory for the approximate century it has existed as a self-conscious theoretical tradition. For, in attempting a critical assessment of the present – aiming, as Marx had it, to capture the "struggles and wishes of the age in thought" – critical theory has always worried about assessing whether the present is in a mode of progress or regress, and in particular, exactly why that might be the case. Further, in undertaking the task of substantively coming to terms with modernity itself, critical theory has usually adopted the thesis, admittedly more or less forthrightly, that both the achievements and horrors of the current age are rooted in the same or similar developmental causes, most classically in (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). Critical social theory has then sought to both normatively assess the substantive character of modernity as progressive or regressive and to explain the empirical causes of these changes, all in order to facilitate the project of human emancipation.

Beyond these substantive, empirical, and emancipatory interests, critical social theory also is invested in the question of progress for methodological

reasons. Generally taking its bearings from left-Hegelian strategies for understanding normativity historically, various forms of critical social theory have adopted different versions of normative reconstruction. The basic idea of such reconstruction is to adduce normative standards for the critique of society out of the normally unthematized normative orders embedded historically in our actual practices, institutions, or social structures. Examples are Habermas's account of the normative rationality embedded in communicative uses of language (Habermas 1990) or Honneth's account of the normative ideals of social freedom embedded in our social institutions (Honneth 2014). To the extent these standards operate as empirical conditions of possibility for our ways of life together, the theorist can appeal to them in a critical assessment of the deficiencies of contemporary society. However, critical theory has generally reached for something stronger than mere appeals to the way we happen to do things around here, for such merely parochial appeals cannot answer to deep worries about ideological distortions or significant damages within our very form of life. Consider Adorno's dictum: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 1974, 39). As Allen has forcefully argued, here is where the idea of progress comes in to save the day in a perfectly left-Hegelian fashion: because certain of our standards are not only drawn out of our historical form of life but can also be shown to result from historical learning processes whereby better standards replaced less adequate earlier ones, our current standards are more than merely contingent accidents (Allen 2016). Though they are not alien deliverances of abstract ideal theory – since immanent to our social life – they are also justified as the outcomes of comprehensibly progressive processes, thereby representing improvements over previous ones. In short then, the concept of progress is ineliminable from critical social theory not only for substantive reasons – as part and parcel of the assessment of modernity itself – but also for methodological reasons – as the surety for the non-accidental character of our own normative standards.

Having argued that progress is methodologically ineliminable from the normative strategy of critical social theory, Allen then launches a two-pronged attack on the concept.[5] First, the rhetoric of progress and civilization has repeatedly been central to Eurocentric and racist rationalizations of colonial and imperialist depredations of non-Western countries by the West – in other words, progress is morally disreputable and ideological. Second – and this is a fourth knock on progress – Allen argues that the concept of progress cannot be used in the way left-Hegelianism envisages to strengthen immanent normative standards beyond mere parochialism. According to the dilemma she develops, either critical theory has a set of universal and timeless moral standards for judging progress in any and all societies – thus violating its commitment to immanent normativity – or it collapses into mere-self-congratulatory parochialism – thus violating its commitment to a fully critical

interrogation of the present as possibly thoroughly damaged. Let me flag this as the dilemma of immanent progress; I will attempt to show how to steer around it with a processual concept of progress below. In the meantime, it is worth stressing that, after an extended critique of the concept of progress as employed in the work of Habermas, Honneth, Forst, Foucault, and Adorno, Allen herself is unwilling to entirely give up on the notion. Suggesting that we foreswear grand and justificatory backward-looking invocations of the progress we have supposedly achieved, Allen nevertheless allows room for modest and self-critical "locally and contextually grounded judgments about progress in history" (Allen 2016, 229). Furthermore, she is unwilling to give up on the aspirational, future-oriented characteristics of progress – what she calls "progress as a forward-looking moral-political imperative" (ibid.) – since, without hope for a better future, critical theory's emancipatory interests would wither, and we would be left only with the bitter taste of past calamities. In other words, like Wagner and McCarthy, Allen apparently understands progress as an ineliminable concept – one that needs to be recuperated in some suitably chastened and reconstructed manner, even after its thorough critique.[6]

PIECEMEAL, PRAGMATIC, AND PROCESSUAL

So then where does all of that leave us? Political progress is an illusionistic ideal: ambiguous and ambivalent; factually discredited and factually undeniable; morally disreputable and normatively ineliminable; ideologically pernicious and yet the ground of ideology critique. Ought we then use "progress" and its cognates in our thinking about contemporary political changes in established constitutional democracies such as those considered in the opening of the paper? If the ideal is illusionistic and yet ineliminable – as I've argued in general and for the particular case of critical social theory – then we'll need to employ a suitably qualified conception of that ideal in our sociopolitical thought. I'd like to conclude by recommending three modifications to, qualifications of, traditional notions of progress that we ought to employ, in concert, in order to fruitfully use the concept in our thinking. In short, assessments of political progress or regress ought to be piecemeal, pragmatic, and processual.

Piecemeal Progress

The first strategy is, simply, chastening claims for progress themselves. Rather than proffering grand judgements about overall progress – the majestic achievements of civilization simpliciter – we ought to limit ourselves to

piecemeal and relatively constrained judgements about progress or regress in specific fields or domains: morality, political institutions and processes, economics, technology, science, personal realization, social relations, art and culture, and so on. More particularly, we ought to disambiguate what domain of social life we are talking about, and limit most claims to one domain at a time: we can talk about progress in computer chip technology or in genomic understanding or in the mechanisms of democratic accountability, but should resist more general claims about the grand march of truth and freedom simultaneously in all domains. And when we do make such claims that span more than one domain, we need to clearly show the causal dependence of changes in one domain on those in the other. For contrary to grand and woolly claims about "civilizational progress," we often witness progress in one domain simultaneously accompanying regress in another. In fact, these concurrent developments may be co-dependent, where the progress in one leads to regress in another and vice versa. Consider the rise of early capital-ism: simultaneous cause of increases in material welfare and in the expan-sion of racial domination through slavery, among other effects (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 7). Furthermore, we need to be open to the possibility of focused, differentiated assessments even within one area of social transfor-mation. For instance, in the domain of democratic politics, recent increases in populism may be simultaneously associated with progress on the register of participation – as more ordinary citizens become active – and regress on the register of inclusiveness – as this participatory energy may be driven by xenophobia or racism. Careful, focused, and piecemeal assessments allow us to acknowledge the ambivalent and complex nature of social changes. Along with domain specificity, piecemeal progress further resists attributions of historical necessity and linearity. That is to say, the metaphysical idea that history evinces some kind of inevitable, motoric, or necessary transformation is replaced by a frank acknowledgement of the contingency and non-inevi-tability of historical change. Likewise, the notion that progress is inherently linear, always moving forward and upward, is replaced by a full awareness of the possibility – and indeed the repeated reality – of stagnation or regress. There was no inevitability to women achieving the right to vote, and there are all too many examples of nations making progress towards more fully real-ized constitutional democracy only to regress into lawless authoritarianism, often with little hope for return to the progressive path.

The piecemeal concept of progress clearly responds directly to the critique of progress as factually discredited, since it avoids making sweeping and overly general truth claims which simply can't be redeemed – and the same goes for grand denunciations of social change as total and unmitigated degenera-tive regress. But it is also secondarily responsive to the worry about progress as morally disreputable, since with piecemeal assessments we are much less

likely to gloss over injustices and calamities with abstract generalities about the forward march of civilization on a grand-scale – we should be thus less tempted towards teleological redemptions of the "slaughter-bench of history" through, says, the cunning of reason coming to know itself in the world. And it is partly responsive to worries about the ideological function of the rhetoric of progress, since it is harder to fulfil that function with respect to merely partially progressive changes, particularly where our assessments highlight simultaneous and often co-dependent instances of progressive and regressive changes. It is therefore not surprising that piecemeal modesty is a large part of the core of the chastened and reconstructed conceptions of progress that are offered by both contemporary defenders – Kitcher, Singer, Buchanann and Powell – and critics – Wagner, McCarthy, and Allen – of progress.

Pragmatic Learning

It is important at this juncture, once we have chastened theory against claims to grand, unfocused, linear, or automatic progress, not to liquidate the distinctive content of the concepts of progress/regress into generic synonyms of better/worse. For, as Buchanan and Powell rightly insist (2018, 45–53), progress cannot be applied to any and every change that we might judge to be superior, nor regress applied to every change for the worse. For instance, a fortuitous reduction in human disease rates due to climate change or a reduction in the crime rate due to depopulation within a territory would not count as instances of progress, since they did not result from some form of cognitive insight and corresponding deliberate changes in our practices. In other words, progress implies change for the better as a result of learning. The directionality evinced in progress is not just a fluke or contingency, but depends on some form of cognitively mediated awareness of a problem or a lack, combined with a more or less purposeful intervention that is intended to address that problem, and then some cognitive assessment of the intervention and its effects that, in turn, loops back into another cycle of awareness-intervention assessment. In Hegelian terms, progress constitutively involves determinate negation and sublation.[7] It is somewhat more complicated to say exactly what regress proper consists in, but at the least we can see that it might involve failures to maintain past progressive achievements, to acknowledge cognizable problems, to intervene appropriately, to responsibly assess failed or non-existent interventions – and any of this as a culpable result, somehow, of cognitive failures or deficits. This specification of progress/regress in terms of learning and unlearning is inspired by the basic pragmatist picture of problem-solving adumbrated clearly by Dewey (1984) and centrally employed by many theorists (Anderson 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Habermas 1984; Honneth 2014; Jaeggi 2018a, 2018b).

It may help to place this pragmatist account of change between two other ideal-typical models of learning: learning as accumulation and learning as stage-sequential development. For learning as the cumulative stockpiling of ever more information or knowledge – while surely important – appears too weak a notion to underwrite assessments of political progress. The state's increasing ability to gain knowledge of diverse agricultural markets may be an improvement, but it seems short of the type of transformative political change that we would want to label progress. On the other hand, the Piagetian conception of learning as linear development through a pre-set sequence of stages, where regress is only possible on pain of psychological or social pathology appears much too demanding a conception to be employed for gauging political changes as progressive or regressive. Though the analogy between cognitive ontogenesis and moral development is at least both theoretically tempting (see Kohlberg) and potentially empirically falsifiable, the further homology between stage-sequential ontogenesis and stage-sequential social learning (Habermas 1979) is likely several steps too far towards revising factually discredited grand Enlightenment theories of progress. In short, insisting on a problem-solving model of learning ensures that progress claims involve nonaccidental changes, with cognitively directed and responsive interventions in the light of felt inadequacies, with a plurality of possibly progressive or regressive paths, yet without the discredited assumptions of linearity, unitary paths, or motoric necessity associated with hubristic philosophies of history.

Processual Progress

Finally, I would recommend we adopt a processual conception of progress rather than a substantialist conception, for as the problem-solving model at least suggests, we need not always have a determinate substantial normative standard for gauging progress. Often it is enough in attributing progress to note that the *process* of change itself embodied the requisite characteristics for learning. This is a significant move away from typical substantialist notions of progress as greater compliance with or approximation of some determinate normative content, where claims of progress need to be made in the light of some clearly articulated and antecedently known substantive goals, standards, norms, principles, social functions, or the like (Kitcher 2011; Singer 2011).

To be sure there are different processual models, all taking off from the Deweyan idea of progress through collective problem-solving. Most ambitiously – perhaps too ambitiously – there is a stage-sequential model of the relevant process, developed by Piaget and Kohlberg for ontogenesis and extended to phylogenesis by Habermas: progress as a process of moving

through an invariant sequence of stages where, in response to crises that cannot be mastered at the current level, each subsequent stage effects an entire conceptual reorganization to a more cognitively adequate scheme and where regress is only possible on pain of serious pathology (Habermas 1979, 1984).[8] Other models are less ambitious and focus on different processes. Anderson focuses on those sociopolitical processes that are beneficial from the point of view of moral epistemology: when moral change happens due to social structures that counteract well-known sources of bias, confusion, oversight, and blindness in our moral thinking, those changes are likely to be progressive (Anderson 2014b, 2014a, 2016). Honneth focuses on processes of change in our major sociopolitical institutions of intimate life, the economy and politics, whereby social movements force experimentation in institutional design that reveal richer conceptions of the basic values integrating those institutions and those changed institutions more fully realize their animating values (Honneth 2014, 2017). Jaeggi's processual model of progress also attends to the dynamics of social movements, but with a focus specifically on changes in social practices and ethical forms of life overall and particularly highlighting the ability to successfully adapt to crises and potential regressions as criteria for progressive forms of life (Jaeggi 2018a, 2018b).

There are a number of advantages of processual over substantialist models. First, they allow for new normative discoveries and improvements through social innovations that cannot be anticipated.[9] Substantialist models, by contrast, posit some fixed content as the stable and unchanging metric of progress, itself measured only in increased compliance or approximation. Second, on processualist accounts, sociopolitical theory need articulate no abstract set of trans-historical and transcontextual values nor more demandingly still fully adumbrate a utopian picture of ideal political institutions in order to gauge progress – it can avoid the arid and unmotivating heights of ideal theory. Third, processual theories can nevertheless secure a form of objectivity when they claim that a change is an instance of progress or regress. While substantialist models gain such objectivity by the ostensibly trans-contextual validity of their abstract standards, processual models posit that it is sufficient to show, for progress, that current arrangements solve problems that previous arrangements could not and, for regress, that current arrangements can no longer solve problems that earlier arrangements could. Consider this as analogous to non-realist but non-sceptical accounts of scientific progress. There is no need to claim that objective scientific progress is secured only by the ever greater approximation of a newer theory to an unmediated independent reality. There is enough objectivity in the cognitive character of the learning process itself: we show that a new theory solves the problems of the previous theory, solves other problems the old theory could not, and is able to explain why the previous theory was incapable of doing so (MacIntyre 1977). And, it is an objective

instance of regress when we can show a process of unlearning, of falling back behind the problem-solving capacities of previous theories. Finally, at least for those forms of critical social theory that attempt to draw normativity immanently out of actual social phenomena while nevertheless retaining a critical distance from the present deliverances of social history, processualist models can avoid the dilemma posed by Allen: claims of progress must either invoke timeless, ideal, and transcendent normative criteria, or, collapse into mere self-congratulatory parochialism. Note that the dilemma depends on the assumption that claims of progress must advert to substantive standards for gauging better or worse. Once we drop that assumption, we can see that there is a third option: objectivity for critical standards achieved through demonstrating actual processes of learning or unlearning, even as those critical standards are drawn out of the world as we actually know it.[10]

REVISITING THE EXAMPLES

Let me suggest, in a very schematic way, how these qualifications of the progress/regress couplet might help make some headway in diagnosing the examples I started with. Consider first the rise of populism across consolidated democracies. First, we should be careful to disambiguate different components of the complex practices and institutions making up constitutional democracy. Thus in the domain of elections we can see populism as progressive in terms of increasing participation and political energy among ordinary citizens. Yet in the domain of governance populists have tended to perform quite poorly, and in the domain of democratic culture populism has tended to foster a fair amount of regressive unlearning of the hard-won achievements of egalitarian pluralism. Populism in general is neither progressive nor regressive; we need a more fine-grained and piecemeal approach. Second, populism appears regressive on the pragmatist register of problem solving. While populism can easily be seen as responding to the twin problems of regime sclerosis and governmental capture by moneyed interests, it simply does not propose or implement cognizable solutions to those problems, let alone maintain past achievements of learning. Finally, the processual accounts of progress can likewise help us to see the regressive features of populism – without using any particular substantive standards valuing or disvaluing particular political policies or principles. For since populism rules only in the name of, and on behalf of, one of several sectors of the relevant demos – claiming to be the sole representative of the real or authentic people – it quite clearly does not fulfil any number of the felicity conditions for learning proposed by different accounts of progress. Consider, for instance, the widely endorsed condition that progressive processes of political change must include input from broad

and diverse contestatory social movements into collective processes of opinion formation in order to facilitate the possibility of social and political learning itself (Anderson 2016; Habermas 1984; Honneth 2014; Jaeggi 2018a) – populism is regressive since it violates processual conditions required for political learning.

Rather than making any sweeping pronouncements about the character of the newer innovations in democratic constitutionalism, I'd like to conclude by recalling the cogent critiques of the rhetoric of progress as factually discredited, morally disreputable, and ideological, while suggesting that the qualified conceptions of progress can keep relevant ambiguities in view. For if we begin from ideal democratic theory, we would surely and simply celebrate both constitutional referendums and constituent assemblies as progressive, as better institutional realizations of the fundamental ideals of self-governance through law. Yet our chastened conception of progress counsels us first, to be sensitive to the facts: constitutional referendums are neither always exercises in high-quality self-rule (see the 2016 Brexit referendum) nor unambiguously democracy-enhancing, serving quite frequently rather to cement ongoing de-democratization (see the April 2019 constitutional referendum in Egypt). And such fact sensitivity is crucial to ensuring that democratic theory gloss over neither moral catastrophes nor ideological uses of the ideals of democratic progress – for example, the 2017 Venezuelan constituent assembly which not only ended democracy, but ideologically celebrated its demise with the exalted rhetoric of self-governance. Partial assessments of progress allow us to acknowledge the potentially illusionistic character of our political ideals in practice.

Let me nevertheless end by evoking the aspirational, future-oriented, and thereby hopeful and motivational registers of progress. Recent empirical scholarship has shown that constitution-making processes with wide, diverse, and early popular participation can have a beneficial impact on prospects for ongoing and long-lived democratic regimes, whereas elite-driven constitution making processes are not as favourable for democratization (Eisenstadt et al. 2017). If we take seriously the pragmatic and processual elements of progress, there is reason for optimism that institutional experimentation with democratic forms of constitutionalism can be seen as democratically progressive: as potential solutions to problems that may increase our capacities for democratic authorship of our fundamental laws. Or at least that is the progressive hope.

NOTES

1. For interestingly contrasting takes on the advisability of constitutional referendums, see Tierney (2012) (largely in favour when properly run and in

suitable conditions) and Lenowitz (forthcoming) (largely against except under special conditions).

2. As different as their respective accounts of the political use of hope are, Ernst Bloch and Richard Rorty agree both that worthwhile politics is based in hope, and, that political hope is closely tied to invocations of political progress (Bloeser and Stahl 2017).

3. These words are from Adorno's notes for his Lecture 1, dated 10 November 1964. In Hilmar Tillack's notes from the lecture, Adorno associates the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, concluding with the thought: "What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?" (Adorno 2006, 8).

4. I am leaving aside here a critique frequently levelled at progress as an inherently chauvinistic discourse, specifically as an exercise in Eurocentric self-celebration that simultaneously entails invidious comparisons to non-Western cultures, peoples, and nation-states (e.g. Allen 2016). For it strikes me that this is not a critique of the concept of rhetoric of progress per se, but rather a perennial but generic danger for any and all normative concepts. For when those concepts are applied favourably to the practices of one's own group (society, nation, people, culture, etc.), there is always a possible inference that labelling our practices as better entails denigrating other groups' practices. It is surely a possibility that one's self-application of a positive normative concept is nothing more than a narcissistic or parochial prejudice dressed up in fancier clothes. But the same is just as true of progress as of other evaluative concepts: rational, just, moral, efficient, beautiful, and so on.

5. Elsewhere, I have considered at length Allen's critique of Honneth's strategy of normative reconstruction, and attempted to articulate the resources available in Honneth's theory of social freedom for responding to the critiques (Zurn 2015, 193–200). In this chapter, I am pulling back from the specifics of these two theorists and attempting to get a more general outlook on the problems and prospects of the concept of political progress.

6. Gray's relentless pessimism is an exception to this pattern of the critics of progress nevertheless endorsing some use of the concept. However, his work evinces a tendency to invoke the concepts of regress and decline, thereby refusing to break with the combination of normative standards and modern time consciousness that I adverted to above as ineliminably giving rise to the progress/regress doublet.

7. Actual political progress is, of course, a much more complex process of change, going well beyond mere freestanding cognitive insight, involving additionally political, institutional, economic, social, praxiological, psychological, and cultural factors. I am avoiding any specific explanatory theory of political change here; I mean merely to insist that learning is criterial for progress, to distinguish progress from lucky change for the better.

8. One might be concerned that Piaget's model of individual development is really a growth model rather than a problem-solving model, where moves from stage to stage are more or less automatically impelled by maturation. While I think this is a misreading of Piaget, it is certainly not the case for Habermas. For he sees ontogenetic and phylogenetic moves from stage to stage as impelled by crises in the current level of communicative rationality and thus the resolution of the problems at the next stage as explained by increases in communicative competences.

9. Buchanan and Powell (2018) argue that we ought reasonably infer from past moral failures that our current moral outlook will likewise be shown to be deficient in the future: "Human beings are not warranted in believing that they currently grasp all valid moral norms or that the norms they believe are valid will remain so under different institutional contexts" (107).

10. I've earlier argued that Honneth ought to adopt such a learning process model in order to better defend his claims for the superiority of certain forms of left-egalitarian economic structures (Zurn 2016b), but I think the point generalizes as a conceptual strategy that can be adopted by many different forms of critical social theory, with different processual models of progress and various methods of drawing on immanent normativity.

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