

Progress and modernity: the problem with autonomy

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ABSTRACT

The idea of modernity is inextricably tied up with the one of progress. One main reason for this connection is that the late eighteenth century, often considered to be the onset of modernity, was in Europe also seen as the dawn of a new society evolving according to a different logic than any preceding one, namely with an open horizon of future possibilities. This article explores the meaning of this opening by first looking at the elaboration of what is called here a “strong concept of progress”, based on the connection between autonomy and reason, and by subsequently confronting this concept with the historical experiences with progress. This confrontation helps to understand the transformations in the expectations of progress from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. As a result a more nuanced view of the relation between progress and modernity will be proposed that can be fruitful for assessing our current expectations of progress in the context of contemporary modernity.

KEY WORDS: autonomy, democracy, domination, modernity, progress

Modernity is often seen as closely associated with progress. Advocates suggest that modern societies are normatively superior to other societies because they have embarked on a progressive historical trajectory. To them, furthermore, abandoning the idea of progress would entail that no normative distinctions between different socio-political situations can be made at all. Critics of modernity today, in turn, hold that the grand narratives of progress have all been refuted, to paraphrase Jean-François Lyotard, or that the belief in a

progressive modernity was an ideology hiding domination, placing all “non-modern” societies in a different historical time, the “not yet” that will always stay behind. We shall return to this latter notion below. In both views, as opposed to each other as they are, modernity is inextricably tied up with progress.

There are some plausible historical reasons to sustain such a connection. Whether we consider the late eighteenth century as witnessing the onset of modernity or not, this period was characterized by a “rupture in societal consciousness” in Europe (Koselleck and Reichardt 1988) that entailed the view of the dawn of a new form of society, a view that should prevail across all the nineteenth century and, with qualifications, way into the twentieth. Significantly, this new society was seen as evolving according to a different logic than any preceding one, namely with an open horizon of future possibilities (Koselleck 2004). This article will explore the meaning of this opening by looking at the elaboration of what is called here a “strong concept of progress” and will follow the historical experiences and re-interpretations of this concept until the early twentieth century, trying to provide a more nuanced view of the relation between progress and modernity.¹

The reasoning will proceed in six steps. First, the new, strong understanding of progress needs to be identified and its emergence understood by setting it in the context of what was perceived as the onset of modernity, closely connected to the idea of human freedom, or autonomy. The subsequent step, secondly, looks at the transformation of the idea of progress in the light of nineteenth-century experiences. These observations lead, thirdly, to interim reflections about conceptions of modernity and their critics, reflections that, fourthly, help us to identify a significant turn in European social thought: rather than seeing human autonomy as the engine of progress, critical observers increasingly came to see autonomy at work in the undermining of progress. Having that far confronted the history of the concept of progress with historical experiences of progress, the article subsequently, in the fifth step, takes a more distant perspective and reviews these findings from a current point of view, suggesting a misreading by contemporary observers: the European nineteenth century was far too little marked by human autonomy for the latter having either generated or

¹ This article draws on Wagner 2015a in which a more detailed analysis as well as an extension of the reflections into the present can be found. The research leading to this article has been funded by the European Research Council as Advanced Grant no. 249438: *Trajectories of modernity: comparing non-European and European varieties*.

undermined progress. The misreading has its source in a problem that was well identified by early thinkers about progress and modernity, such as Immanuel Kant, but never satisfactorily resolved: the relation between individual freedom and collective autonomy, which will be discussed in the sixth step, pointing out that actual progress during the nineteenth century came about through domination and resistance to domination rather than autonomy. A brief coda reflects about the ways in which the issue might be addressed today.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT CONNECTION: AUTONOMY AND PROGRESS AT THE ONSET OF MODERNITY

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the expectation arose in Europe that comprehensive and sustained improvement of the human condition was possible. Furthermore, such improvement was not only possible; it was even likely to happen because one had gained insight into the conditions for it to emerge. This change of expectations was the invention of progress as a comprehensive evaluative political concept – as a strong concept, as we will call it further on.

In comparison with any view of improvement held before, this concept of progress marked a radical break. It connected normative advances in the human condition with a long and linear perspective. And it disconnected those advances from direct human agency; progress itself came to be endowed with causal agency. A positive transformation in the human condition was seen as being on the horizon of history, a transformation of such a radical kind that had never been considered as even remotely possible before. The normative expectations regarding the future were detached from the current life-experiences in Europe, as Reinhart Koselleck put it.

Today we are not inclined to hold this strong belief any longer. Our doubts concern both the underlying philosophy of history, with its normative-evolutionist thrust, and the “method”, namely the detaching of expectations from experiences. As we shall argue in what follows, our expectations have not least changed due to the experiences with progress that we have made. To better understand those experiences, in turn, we need to start by inquiring into the assumptions on which this concept of progress was built.

This inquiry quickly yields a first and very general result. Those whom we call Enlightenment thinkers shared one basic assumption on which everything else was built: they saw human beings as capable of autonomy and as endowed with

reason. Reason allowed them the insight into the problems they were facing and the development of the means to solve them. Autonomy allowed them to choose the adequate means and to take the appropriate action. This is what enables improvement in terms of solving problems. Furthermore, human beings have memory and can learn. Therefore, rather than every generation having to address the same problem again, successive generations can build on the achievements of the earlier ones and improve on them. This connection of reason, autonomy and learning capacity is what creates the conditions for historical progress of humankind.

If this is so, however, one further question immediately arises, namely the question why there has not been more and more sustained progress in human history up to 1800. But the question, too, found a plausible answer at the time. Humankind then stood only at the “exit from self-incurred immaturity” (Immanuel Kant). It had not yet dared to make full use of its capacity to reason; and often enough human beings had not been free, they were living under various forms of domination. But this was about to change, not least as a consequence of Enlightenment thought, so one assumed. And once the conditions for human beings to live autonomously and reason freely were created, then progress would impose itself and could no longer be stopped. With this additional insight, we not only understand why there has not been that much progress before 1800; we are furthermore given reasons why expectations about future progress under conditions of autonomy should detach themselves from the past experiences made under conditions of “immaturity”. The exit from immaturity spelt exactly the dawn of the new era, the era of modernity.

The two preceding paragraphs are a caricature of Enlightenment thought. Hardly any thinker can be found who endorses this reasoning in such a simplistic way. But a caricature exaggerates features that are indeed there, and so does this. In other words, without maintaining some commitment to the beneficial combination of freedom and reason, it would have been impossible to arrive at the strong notion of progress and to display the optimism that goes along with it. On this basis, we can now take a closer look, move beyond the caricature and try to identify how the interplay of autonomy and reason brings historical change.

In 1784, Immanuel Kant wrote two short texts which show both his commitment to the principle of autonomy and the expectation that human freedom will lead humankind onto the road to progress in history. In *Answer to the question: What is the Enlightenment?* he defines the latter as the “exit from

self-incurred immaturity”, as mentioned above. *Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view* starts with the suggestion that we can develop a reading of history that “permits us to hope that if we attend to the play of freedom of the human will in the large, we may be able to discern a regular movement in it, and that what seems complex and chaotic in the single individual may be seen from the standpoint of the human race as a whole to be a steady and progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment”.

Freedom, thus, indeed leads to progress in Kant's view, as the caricature description maintained. However, this is no short and easy way. Freedom, first of all, does not create harmony; Kant rather emphasizes the ambivalent, even contradictory inclinations of human beings, for which he coins the term “unsocial sociability”: Humans want to be together with other human beings and to isolate themselves from others. As a consequence of the antagonism between human beings, history is marked by war, strife, greed, vanity, chaos, unruliness. But how then is progress possible?

Reading again the opening sentence of Kant's *Idea*, one recognizes that the steady and progressive evolution is not recognizable in individual human actions, but only “in the large”. All the discord can be shown to lead to something new as the collective outcome of human actions. The “resistance”, namely, that human beings encounter through other human beings “awakes all forces” in them, “makes them overcome their laziness and [...] gain a rank among [their] fellow human beings”. As a result of this activity, “the first true steps from rawness to culture” are taken; “all talents are gradually developed; the sense of taste is formed”; and continued enlightenment can then even mark the beginning of the foundation of society as a moral whole. Thus, Kant describes the mechanism, as current analytical sociology would call it, that turns individual human actions into positive collective outcomes beyond the intention of the actors.

The explanation of the mechanism divides Kant's interpreters. On the face of it, Kant stipulates a plan of nature on the basis of the following reasoning: Everything in nature has a purpose. Human beings, although having the particularity of being endowed with reason, are part of nature. Therefore, human history must have a purpose. And this purpose, to be reached in the long run, is the foundation of society as a moral whole. This is an a priori assumption that we have difficulties sharing today. And without it, Kant's notion of progress falls.

But there is another way of reading the text. In this view, Kant does not claim at all that history actually is on a steady and progressive path. In the face of the apparent complexity and chaos, rather, he explores the conditions of possibility for identifying such a path, if any. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 63) said about Marx, Kant “does not so much provide us with a teleology of history as with a perspectival point from which to read the archives”. The reason why one should do so is existential – so as not to despair – but also practical. Kant believes that a review of positive experiences in human history can enlighten collective action, or rather: the action of rulers, in the present and thus enhance the prospect for a better future. If there is a direction in human history, therefore, it is not in any plan of nature, as we would normally understand this term,² but it can be gathered by current “philosophical attempts” to review human history, using the faculty of understanding they are endowed with, with the objective of finding an answer to the question of living well together accepting the other's autonomy.

In this reading, the “plan of nature” is nothing that is effective without human beings contributing to it, no external device that drives human history. Rather, it is something that can be detected by a “philosophical attempt” in history. While there is a relation between autonomy and reason in Kant that is foundational for progress, this is not at all an automatic one. Human freedom left on its own has ambivalent outcomes. Reason is needed to decipher those outcomes with a view to elevating the progressive moments in human history to higher significance and make them direct future action (for more details on such reading of Kant, see Karagiannis and Wagner 2009).

Let it be noted here, for future reference below, that this is politico-philosophical reason, a particular form of reason. It is within the human world, not external to it. But it is not part of the everyday “unsocial sociability”. To maintain his hope for progress, Kant had to step out of the chaos and complexity of general human activity and prioritize a very particular human activity as a guide to reading the ways of the world.³ In other words, Kant's social ontology

² Due to the fact that we are used to operate with a strong distinction between “nature” and “society”, which Kant did not. For seeing this distinction as constitutive of modernity, see Latour (1991).

³ In a more detailed reading, this observation would be related to Kant's distinction between *Vernunft* (reason) and *Verstand* (understanding). The distinction is not taken up here; I refer to both capacities as “reason”, providing a broad and admittedly sweeping view of Enlightenment thought.

remained limited to the theorem of unsocial sociability. To resolve the problems arising from such ambiguous human inclinations, he resorted to political institutions, and he reasoned about them in terms of conditions of possibility. Furthermore, he had no view of any temporal dynamics in the play of those human inclinations. They appear as an anthropological constant. The temporal dynamics that one finds in his writings – the reason why one can refer to them as a progressive philosophy of history – is entirely related to the detection of progress on the way to a moral order of society, as revealed through a perspectival reading of history.

EXPERIENCES WITH PROGRESS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MODERNITY

Half a century after Kant's death, the combined effect of the political and economic transformations since the late eighteenth century had created a socio-political situation that appeared to confirm Kant's (and in general the Enlightenment's) assumption that socio-political arrangements are constituted by human beings through their actions – in other words, modernity based on the commitment to human autonomy. But experiences with such arrangements had suggested that new social phenomena were emerging as the outcome of human action. One now needed to see whether these outcomes spelt progress or not.

Maintaining the basic assumptions of late eighteenth century thought, scholars became increasingly convinced that one could now, by mid-19th century, know more about the ongoing socio-political transformations. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/40) analyzed the social impact of democracy, and he advanced a notion of the direction of history when he suggested that (what one now calls) democratization would not come to a halt before equal universal suffrage was reached. For him, this was inescapable; whether it was progress was less certain. Lorenz von Stein (1850) observed the emergence of “social movements” in response to the economic changes related to the liberty of commerce and the rise of a market economy. In both cases, the creation of specific institutional conditions for human freedom – the political vote and the economic right to buy and sell – were seen as having unleashed an unintended and unforeseen social dynamics that would need to be taken into account when considering the conditions for progress or, to speak in Kant's terms, for establishing a moral order.

The scholar who developed such mode of thinking most forcefully at this moment was Karl Marx. For Marx, the unintendedly produced structures were the capitalist mode of production with new antagonistic classes. Rather than equally free economic actors, the new socio-political order produced a radical divide between those who owned the means of production and those who did not. The dynamics was unleashed by market competition, as indeed foreseen and intended by classical political economy, and by class struggle, which was in the centre of Marx's political concerns. Having witnessed economic crises and the deterioration of the conditions of the working classes, Marx thought he was recognizing clear trends of historical change as a consequence of this dynamics, but no longer linear progress. Well acquainted with Hegel's thought, however, he was also able to consider end-points of certain trends, the reaching of which would lead to a change of direction. Combining economic analysis and philosophy of history with political analysis, he elaborated his particular view of historical directedness that foresaw movement towards the point of unsustainability of the capitalist mode of production, for reasons of both competition and class struggle, and subsequently the emergence of a new historical horizon, entirely open and to be determined by free human beings in free association.

In other words, the Kantian problem is well recognizable in Marx's writings. Like Kant, Marx was committed to human agency, and similarly he recognized the “antagonism” in human social relations. For him, though, the negative consequences of this antagonism could not be overcome by an institutional design pulled from a selective reading of historical experiences. The structures and dynamics that he identified were too powerful for such a hope. But, following Kant's “methodology”, he searched through such dynamics to identify the prospect for positive change. For the relation between agency and phenomena “in the large”, this now required to situate agency within the course of the dynamics that had been unleashed.

The tension between human agency, on the one hand, and the identification of determining structures and dynamics, on the other, is an unresolved dilemma in Marx's writings. In the sober analysis of *Capital*, to take one example, which as a “critique of political economy” aims at uncovering the contradictions of a capitalist mode of production, the “tendency of the rate of profit to fall” has often been taken as the core argument for demonstrating the inescapably self-destructive tendencies of capitalism. However, Marx adds to this analysis the enumeration of “countervailing factors” many of which can contingently arise

at any moment and lead to a transformation of capitalism – possibly both unintended and unforeseen – rather than its end.

In political pamphlets, in turn, the expression of the tension between a compelling driving force of history and the intervention of human agency can take dramatic shape. The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, co-authored with Friedrich Engels, appears to be a statement of historical progress in which class struggle drives history towards communism. The fact that both the bourgeoisie, historically, and the proletariat, for the future, are hailed for their heroic actions does not change this interpretation, because the activities of both classes are effective and successful precisely in as far as they are in harmony with the progressive course of history. This common reading, however, overlooks the doubts that Marx and Engels, too, had about the history of humanity. At the very beginning of the pamphlet, and nevertheless mostly overlooked, we find the conjecture that class struggle may also end – indeed, sometimes ended – with the “common ruin of the contending classes”. This theme of defeat and disaster, though marginal, has never disappeared from the Marxian tradition. In 1915, Rosa Luxemburg analyzed the world-historical situation after the beginning of the First World War and the vote of social-democratic members of the German *Reichstag* in favour of war loans, in terms of a stark alternative: “either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism”. Ultimately, Marx and those who followed him do not claim to know the course of history, because human beings can always act otherwise – for the better, and for the worse.

QUESTIONING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AUTONOMY, MODERNITY AND PROGRESS

These observations on Marxian thinking lead us to considerations about doubts on progress that had co-existed with the concept of progress since its invention, but were to accumulate in Europe in the later nineteenth century and, in particular, in the years after the First World War. The critique of progress on which such doubts were based could take very different forms. One can criticize the general idea that the conditions for human life on earth can be lastingly improved, or one can criticize the more specific idea that human autonomy leads to progress. Furthermore, one can draw different conclusions from those critiques: in the former case, one might turn away from any attempt at improvement, or one can aim for as much betterment as one can reach in one's own time. In the latter case, one can reject the very idea of organizing human social life on the basis of autonomy, that is, reject modernity, or one can

consider additional conditions under which human interaction on the basis of autonomy becomes collectively beneficial.

The view that any attempt at improvement should not even be started at all has brilliantly been reconstructed by Albert Hirschman (1991) as the rhetoric of reaction. The term “reactionary”, namely, entered our political language precisely as a denomination for those who reacted against the commitment to progress that had emerged forcefully from the late eighteenth century onwards. This rhetoric, Hirschman demonstrates, mobilizes three figures of speech: attempts at betterment are futile because the human condition cannot be altered; they are perverse because they lead to unintended consequences that entail a deterioration of the human condition; and/or they are dangerous because they might undermine normative accomplishments that already exist.

The more specific view that human autonomy paves the way to progress has similarly been criticized from the moment that Enlightenment thinkers had spread that idea. Commenting on the French Revolution from across the Channel, Edmund Burke (1790) would say a few years after Kant: “The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may *do* what they *please*, we ought to see what it will *please them to do*, before we risk congratulations.” Some of Burke's French contemporaries, such as Bonald and Maistre held stronger views: they would not even want to see what it might please individuals to do, because a well-ordered society is an organic whole that assigns individuals their places and possibilities for action. Compared with such rejection of autonomy, Burke moderately only raises a valid concern: If human beings truly exercise their free will, there is little we can know beforehand about the outcome of this exercise. We may indeed say that both Kant and Marx recognized the issue and invoked politico-philosophical reason or pointed to competition and class struggle as ways to direct or understand, respectively, the consequences of autonomy.

In the beginning we have seen that the strong notion of progress suggests that lasting improvement is both *possible and probable*, and that it *will* be achieved through human autonomy.

For the purposes of reconstruction, I provisionally suggest that we need to maintain, in general, that betterment is *possible in principle* and, specifically, that it *needs* to be achieved under conditions of autonomy, even though additional considerations on the workings of autonomy can be introduced. We may call this the minimum conditions for a weak notion of progress. If we abandoned any notion of possible improvement, we would have no concept of

progress at all any longer. If we abandoned the commitment to autonomy, we would jettison the core normative principle of modernity.

In this light, we may consider those views that hold that improvement is not possible and/or that it cannot be achieved under conditions of autonomy as *external critiques* of progress. In turn, those views that hold that the direction of history is not necessarily marked by progress and that regress, too, is possible and/or that progress does not emerge automatically under conditions of autonomy, we may consider as *internal critiques* of progress. For our purposes, the internal critiques are much more relevant than the external ones, because they invite for rethinking, whereas the external ones suggest abandoning the concepts of progress and/or of modernity.

A note of caution needs to be added. Sometimes it is not easy to identify whether a critique is internal or external. Does Burke, for instance, raise his question rhetorically to suggest that we should not even think about building societies and polities on individual autonomy? Or does he invite for an investigation of the socio-political consequences of doing so? The former would be an external critique, the latter an internal one. In some cases, thinkers start out from a commitment to autonomy but conclude that it cannot be maintained.

CRITIQUES: AUTONOMY UNDERMINING PROGRESS

As the brief confrontation of Marx with Kant has shown, the conceptualization of progress changes with historical context. One could think that this is due to a simple fact: as time passes, there are more historical events to consider in the assessment of whether there has been progress or not, thus the judgement is likely to change. But there is also a more specific contextual change: the Enlightenment authors saw themselves as writing at the dawn of the era of autonomy, of modernity. To exaggerate slightly: they had only expectations, no experience. Marx, in turn, is writing in the light of experiences with autonomy that he wishes to analyze. He sees how autonomy via commodification turns into alienation, to put it crudely. In other words, expectations were set free from the constraints of experiences at around 1800, and the horizon was widely open. By mid-century, experiences had partly caught up with expectations. One could return to defining expectations in the light of experiences, even though the horizon remained somewhat open.

It is fruitful to continue this contextual analysis by briefly looking at Max Weber's reflections in the early twentieth century. Weber is the most important

analyst of the rise of occidental rationalism, a thesis on long-term social change with a strong direction. As he famously defined one of his key research questions: “what concatenation of circumstances has led to the fact that in the Occident, and here only, cultural phenomena have appeared which – as at least we like to imagine – lie in a direction of development of universal significance and validity?” There is indeed both a temporal and a spatial direction here. Phenomena appear in one place and develop there, but then they spread to presumably gain universal significance.

In terms of his philosophy of social science and methodology, at the same time, Weber is the one among the “classical” sociologists who was least inclined to postulate laws of social change or the existence of large-scale social phenomena that determine human action. Human beings and the ways in which they give meaning to their lives and their relations to others were in the centre of his attention. His ambition was to reach an understanding of large-scale, long-term durable social phenomena (“in the large”, as Kant had put it) starting out from the meaningful action of human beings. *The Protestant Ethic*, with all its flaws, remains a highly instructive document for – maybe: a monument to – such an attempt.

For the purpose of the reasoning here, the key observation on this text is this: Weber starts out from the way human beings give meaning to their lives and then demonstrates how the actions they pursue in relation to their world-interpretation transform the world in such a way that further work at giving meaning is neither necessary nor effective in any way. This is the long-term historical connection through which a world-interpretation, the Protestant ethic, brought about a rigid set of institutions, modern capitalism: “the spirit has escaped from the cage”. Subsequently, Weber talks about the mechanical foundations of victorious capitalism and uses temporal expressions such as “no longer” and “finally”. This has supported the interpretation of Weber's view on rationalization as uni-directional as well as progressive, because of the increase in functional efficiency, as later taken up by Talcott Parsons and the sociology of “modernization and development”, but also – more nuancedly – by Jürgen Habermas in *Theory of communicative action*.

But Weber's views have also given rise to different interpretations. The comparative sociology of religions has inspired the recent research programme on “multiple modernities”, as pioneered by Shmuel Eisenstadt, suggesting a plurality of historical trajectories without convergence. And the underlying scepticism about the inhabitability of a spiritless cage is in the background of

strong critiques of progress, such as most significantly Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. This rather large variety of interpretations has been invited by Weber himself, who inserted an important parenthesis in his diagnosis of the present: “whether finally, who knows?”. And subsequently he added an explicit rejection of linear views of progress – or maybe of any view of progress altogether: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development, entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance.” If the range of possibilities is such, and if “no one knows”, the future could hardly be more undetermined.

In the light of Koselleck's felicitous metaphors, a strong irony – or should we call it a paradox? – is present in this intellectual tradition. Progress is originally conceived as the detachment from experience and as the opening of a wide horizon of expectations. But the more experience with possible progress is made, the less expectation of actual progress there is. After hundred-and-fifty years, the experience of autonomy, or so it seems, has cancelled the expectation of progress.

Between 1784 and 1944, the concept of progress had risen and declined. The thinking about progress had maintained a connecting thread, the notion of Enlightenment – or more broadly, of human autonomy. But in the course of observation and reflection the emphasis had shifted from the *assumption* of autonomy to the *consequences* of autonomy. And whereas the former permitted a close connection between autonomy and progress, the latter questioned this connection – and increasingly so, up to this historical moment.

RE-READING THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE OF PROGRESS: AUTONOMY AND DOMINATION

At this point, the suspicion arises that proponents and critics of progress alike may have misinterpreted the European nineteenth-century experience. Intellectually, clearly, the European nineteenth century stood in the shadow of the Enlightenment and its commitment to autonomy. But in terms of practices and institutions much less so. With the Vienna Congress of 1815, the revolutionary period was over for the time being. The revolutionary moments of 1830, 1848 and 1871 signal that the imaginary of autonomy was alive in Europe. But their occurrence and their suppression also demonstrate that European societies had not at all yet been transformed in the light of this imaginary. For

reasons of this discrepancy between intellectual change and socio-political change, I want to suggest, observers have misinterpreted the European nineteenth century as a history of progress based on autonomy and, accordingly, have exaggerated the consequences of autonomy. The misjudgement was double: First, it was erroneously assumed that the era of autonomy had already begun. In turn, secondly, identifiable structures of domination were misread as a new kind of domination created by the commitment to autonomy.

To repeat: Thinkers of the late Enlightenment, such as Immanuel Kant, saw themselves as living at the dawn of a new era, the era of autonomy. They participated in the elaboration of a strong concept of progress, which was squarely based on autonomy, because they assumed that this era of autonomy had begun. We could say that future progress, based on the strong concept, was dependent on prior progress, namely the exit from immaturity. At a second look, though, we cannot at all be certain that the prior progress had indeed happened or was about to happen.

As we know, Kant speaks about *self-incurred* immaturity, because it is not the lack of ability but the lack of audacity that lets human beings remain in the state of immaturity. He grants that lack of practice to make use of one's understanding entails current lack of ability. For that reason, learning is necessary and the societal exit from immaturity may take a long time. He also suggests that being guided by others may be a convenient state, so that not everyone will be immediately eager to exit from it and dare to self-determine their lives. These are some of the obstacles on the way to an era of autonomy.

But Kant does not consider the benefits that those who guide may obtain from telling others what to do. And neither does he make a distinction between daring to think (*sapere aude*) and daring to act, when necessary, against immaturity that is not entirely self-incurred. In other words, he does not make a distinction between immaturity in general and formal, institutional domination. The difference is between becoming personally autonomous under conditions of formal equal freedom, on the one hand, and claiming one's autonomy by demanding equal freedom in situations where it does not exist, on the other. The former is exit from self-incurred immaturity, the latter exit from domination.

Thus, for instance, Kant considers women as among those who find it more convenient to be guided than making use of their own understanding. But he does not discuss the existing legal subjection to men at the time. He rightly claims for women equal capacity of understanding, but does not explore the fact that the prevailing view was that their capacity was not equal to the one of men,

and that this inequality was sedimented in legal and institutional forms. As the French Revolution should demonstrate a few years later, the abolition of formal inequalities was on the political agenda during this period, with calls for equal rights and equal suffrage for women and men, the abolition of slavery and the abolition of serfdom. But slavery was formally abolished as late as the end of the nineteenth century in some countries; equal suffrage for men and women was rarely introduced in Europe before 1919, in France as late as after the Second World War; and equal rights often as late as the 1970s; only the abolition of serfdom proceeded at a quicker pace. While there was – and still is – self-incurred immaturity, there also were many forms of immaturity that cannot adequately be characterized as self-incurred. They did not mean primarily the acceptance to be guided by another, even though they may often also have entailed that. They meant the imposition of guidance that had to be obeyed to, by means other than understanding, or at least also by means other than understanding. These situations are more precisely called situations of domination rather than, in too general form, situations of immaturity.

If this can be accepted, the subsequent question is what impact the persistence of domination has for the strong concept of progress. The consequence is the interruption of the conceptual connection between autonomy and progress that had been assumed in the strong concept. As we had seen, this connection was created by reason. Progress was sustained by the autonomous action of reason-endowed human beings. Under conditions in which, however, people are kept in immaturity through domination, thus are not autonomous, one can no longer presuppose that an understanding of the situation will be developed that automatically entails progress. A different substantive conception of progress would need to be developed for such situations. Under conditions of domination through formal inequality, every action that leads towards the end of such domination will entail progress, at least progress of some kind, progress towards equality. Such action would also be guided by some logic or dynamic: we may call it struggle for inclusion or struggle for recognition as equals. Achieved progress would mean exit from imposed immaturity and thus also greater autonomy. But it is no longer, as in the strong concept, the work of autonomous human beings itself that leads to progress. What is progress here is rather the overcoming of heteronomy.

Returning to the European nineteenth century, one can say that forms of autonomy co-existed with forms of domination. Certain civil and political liberties and commercial freedom had been introduced. But many of the former were restricted to property-owning men, and the meaning of the latter

depended very much on whether one had more to sell than one's labour-power. In the light of the preceding reflection, the question is in how far one should look for the kind of progress that was expected due to the reason-based exercise of autonomy or for the other kind of progress – apparently logically prior, as one used to say in some Marxist debates – to be expected from the struggle for inclusion and recognition, against domination.

We will not be able to fully answer this question here, but for the purpose of conceptual reconstruction it is important to note that the thinking on progress of the time opted for a yet different interpretation. From Marx to Weber to Adorno and Horkheimer, primacy has been given to autonomy, but with the twist of suggesting that the exercise of autonomy historically created new forms of domination, to the point of undermining the possibility of autonomy. This kind of analysis radicalized between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century. Marx focused on commodification, but this entailed the emergence of a new class with the potential for creating the conditions for substantive autonomy. Weber concentrated on rationalization and could not find a systematic reason, only contingent possibilities, for further social change. Adorno and Horkheimer placed the emphasis on philosophical abstraction and saw the effects as totalizing, devoid of any angle for change.

Each of these perspectives speaks to and captures some aspects of the world they are about. In each case, however, one can also suspect that they considerably misread the historical evidence. Marxist thinking assumed that serfdom had become a fetter to the further development of the productive forces and needed to be abolished to pave the way for commodification. But would it not in many situations be more plausible to say that the abolition of serfdom required the elites to find other means to force the poor to work (see Halperin 2005)? If the latter is the adequate interpretation, then we rather see here a displacement of a conflict as a consequence of achieved progress. Similarly, there may be a linkage between the protestant ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. But the modern-capitalist rationalization of the “iron cage” form is much more associated with Taylorism and the conveyor-belt, which stand in the continuation of attempts to control the work-force and have little to do with religious ethic. And though atomization and quantification through bureaucracy have been tools of totalitarian domination, it is difficult to agree that it was the socio-political consequences of abstraction that brought Hitler or Stalin to power.

These critiques of progress are not entirely flawed, but they are in many respects problematic. First, they one-sidedly focused on the historical consequences of

autonomy, thus make it difficult to retrieve the concept of autonomy for a rethinking of progress, for which though it is necessary. Secondly, they unduly neglected a different interpretation of progress in European post-Enlightenment history. Struggles against formal domination, namely, have by and large been successful in Europe, even though often only over the long run. And as such, they have achieved progress. But it is important to underline that they have predominantly been struggles for equal inclusion and recognition, against exclusion and misrecognition, not against commodification, rationalization or abstraction, even though negative consequences of these phenomena have often been felt and concerns about them voiced. One might even turn the perspective around: to some extent, commodification, rationalization and abstraction and quantification can be interpreted as measures taken by the elites to accommodate the successes of the struggles for inclusion and recognition, thus displacing the focus of socio-political struggle. As a consequence, thirdly, the critics downplayed the possibility of considering progress – partial progress, to be sure, along some dimension, not comprehensive progress – to be achieved through domination, Marx being a significant exception. An example is material progress achieved through capitalist domination. And finally, the critical interpretation of the consequences of autonomy shifted attention away from the problems that emerge with progress under conditions that approach equal freedom. These problems were recognized in Enlightenment debate, but they were never frontally addressed for reasons that we now briefly explore.

PROGRESS BETWEEN PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND COLLECTIVE AUTONOMY

The commitment to autonomy is a problem for progress because it makes it extremely difficult to know and understand how social life will be arranged and organized. If everyone is free to do what it pleases them to do, phenomena “in the large” are nothing but the result of the actions of numerous human beings and their consequences. Endowed with reason, human beings give meanings to their actions, and their intentions are based on these meanings. This is what makes actions, in principle, intelligible for other human beings, as Weber underlined. But we have no *a priori* ground to assume that the outcome of the actions of numerous free human beings is as intelligible as an individual action. And we have no ground either to assume that such outcome is as beneficial as the intended result of an individual action would be for the actor whenever the

action is successful. That is why there is no straight line from autonomy to progress, as Kant knew.

In other words, the commitment to autonomy introduces a high degree of uncertainty and contingency. As human beings live together with others, however, we nevertheless would like to know what the social result of the multiple exercise of autonomy is; and we would like to know in particular whether this outcome is beneficial for our lives. The authors we have looked at tried to reduce uncertainty and contingency while maintaining the commitment to autonomy. This ambition required them to make additional assumptions or observations.

As we have seen, the starting tension is conceived as one between *personal* autonomy and *unintended collective* outcomes of such autonomy. If we look at the political dimension of Enlightenment thought, though, the emphasis was not just on personal autonomy; it included a commitment to collective autonomy expressed as popular sovereignty or democracy. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it was often noted that the slogan of the French Revolution had been interpreted in a biased way, giving preference to individual over collective self-determination, and the democratic impetus had been defeated in all republican debates of the time, in Europe, North America and South America. This bias and defeat are significant for the concept of progress because actual processes of collective self-determination could have been defined as the site at which collective intentionality would be formed. And with recourse to the human capacity for reason, a connection between *collective* autonomy and progress could have been formed that does not have to be too concerned about the unintended consequences of the sum of individual actions. We can read Jürgen Habermas's (1962) early investigation in the emergence of the public sphere as a search for the elaboration of such collective intentionality. But in a hyper-Kantian way, he projected too much reason into the historical debates, as later research showed (see, for instance, Baker 1990). The experience of democracy being absent, collective intentions cannot truly be detected.

Now we can read our authors in a different light. Having identified the problem of unintended consequences of the actions of a large number of autonomous individuals, but being unable to access directly the possible outcome of collective autonomy, for lack of historical experience, they needed to resort to substitutes. Kant – before and after the French Revolution – aimed to detect the collective intention in the reason applied by philosophers to history, a political reason that would outweigh the play of human inclinations. Half a century later,

Marx envisaged positive collective intentionality to be directly expressed by a rising universal class, the proletariat, turning downside up, as he thought, Hegel's notion of the state as the site of the universal. Another half century later, Weber could not maintain either of these hopes when analyzing history. The "iron cage" is without spirit and movement; the only hope – but also danger – is for the contingent eruption of old ideals or new prophets. Yet forty years further, Adorno and Horkheimer brought this way of thinking to a conclusion. In their view, the Enlightenment commitment to autonomy had been completely cancelled in the historical attempt at realizing it, thus as self-cancellation.

In the light of the whole tradition of approaching progress through the notion of autonomy, we can now ask what idea of autonomous agency is contained in these substitute solutions to the absence of actual collective agency. In Kant, there is implicitly some idea of political philosophers being able to accomplish the task of reading history from the angle of progress. But the question as to why those philosophers should have superior understanding is left open. In Marx, progressive agency clearly and explicitly resides in a social class, the proletariat, defined by its socio-juridical position. But here the very strong presupposition is that the commonality of social position creates common interest and, furthermore, that the expression of this interest of the working class will lead to progress of humanity as a whole. Beyond his openness to contingency, one finds in Weber a trace of hope-providing agency in the charismatic personality. In Adorno, there is no agency, consolation – a term Kant already used – can only be found in the aesthetic realm.

Embarking on the notion that autonomy, given the context of its emergence as a guiding idea, undermined itself in the process of historical realization and led to entirely new forms of domination, critical theory failed to recognize how the contextual elaboration of a project of autonomy connected to actual forms of domination. A short conceptual discussion is needed before returning to the historical context.

As mentioned above, the commitment to autonomy, which is central for our understanding of modernity, gives rise to the question of how to attain certainty. Autonomy means giving oneself one's own law. Arguably, therefore, the idea of autonomy already contains a reference to mastery, namely to establish the law that henceforth is to guide one's own actions, or in other words, to control the outcome of one's own actions. In this move, a tension is created: once there is a law to be followed, there is a limit to autonomy, to freedom. In the first

instance, the temporality of human action is at the core of the matter: We may have freely established the law to follow at one moment, but at the next moment this law turns into a constraint. Cornelius Castoriadis referred to this tension as the relation between the instituting moment of social life, giving the law, and the instituted moment, facing the law that already exists.

This relation appears paradoxical when the self that gives the law is always exactly the same as the one that obeys the law (as Kant knew, see clause 6 of *Idea*). This is what the term autonomy suggests. In historical practice, though, these two “entities” have been considered as standing in some separation from each other. Such separation was the historical way of establishing certainty under conditions of autonomy. For the nineteenth century, we can single out three types of separation. First, the law can emerge from, and be implemented by, an agency that knows what human beings *should* want for their life in common rather than what they *actually* express. This agency was the more or less enlightened state that granted personal liberties but reserved the right to interfere with liberties in the name of the common good. Furthermore, it was possible to conceive of the main consequences of human autonomy as not being directed against one's fellow human beings, but against something or someone other. Thus, secondly, a main result of the unleashing of human autonomy was the increasing control of nature, and its exploitation, in what we have come to call the Industrial Revolution, allegedly for the good of all. And, thirdly, the exercise of autonomy as domination of others found its expression in European colonialism. For our purposes it is important to underline that all three historical forms of domination – the enlightened liberal state, the Industrial Revolution, and colonialism – have arisen in the context of increasing emphasis on autonomy in European politico-philosophical debate.

Across the nineteenth century, the prevailing perception was that some such combination of autonomy and domination was viable, and increasingly so. Debates about democracy, the realization of which would have moved the law-giving self closer to the law-abiding self, could be fended off and suppressed by the elites. The progress in the industrial transformation of the world was regularly celebrated in the World Fairs. And colonial domination reached its high point with the Berlin conference of 1884-5. Thus, the *actual* relation between autonomy and control, far from the dilemma that it *conceptually* entailed, could be seen as evolving smoothly and progressively in a “direction of development”, even of progress from some point of view. The increase of power and wealth of the European elites is the background against which what is discussed in terms of possibilities by Kant becomes the self-propelled dynamics

of class struggle for Marx and the “dwelling-places of steel” of “victorious capitalism” for Weber. Thus, in actual historical practice, it was not so much the undermining of autonomy in the process of its realization that shaped the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the combination of an increase of autonomy of the European elites with domination over nature, with domination over the majority of the European population and with colonial domination. From the elites' point of view, this was progress. From the point of view of critical theorists, it was not, but these theorists failed to recognize how progress had been derailed: not by the consequence of autonomy as such, but by the limited exercise of autonomy in combination with domination.

CODA: PROGRESS IN AN ERA OF COLLECTIVE AUTONOMY?

The absence of an experientially rich concept of collective autonomy and intentionality was crucial for this misreading. Paradoxically, this idea rose as a political concept while it withered away as a socio-philosophical concept. From mid-nineteenth century, left-Hegelians were calling for overcoming liberalism with democratism; and Tocqueville confirmed democracy as the sign of the times. By the end of the century, the women's movement and the workers' movement had placed equal universal suffrage into the centre of their agenda, as a precondition for realizing their substantive claims. By 1919, the idea of popular sovereignty had widely translated into the institutions of equal-suffrage competitive-party democracy. Against the often fierce opposition of the elites, the struggle for inclusion and recognition had successfully supported the notion of developing institutions for collective self-determination. By the end of the First World War, these institutions, although not generally appreciated, appeared to be without alternative in Europe. At that time, though, their existence did not have any impact on the conceptualization of progress.

This observation raises questions, which cannot be pursued in detail here (for some reflections see Wagner 2015a and b), for our present time. Since the end of the Second World War the commitment to democracy is widespread, and even increasingly so if we are willing to believe in the theorem of unstoppable waves “democratization”. This means, on the one hand, that the actual experience of democracy could give us some insights, which were historically unavailable, into what it pleases human beings to do when they are free. The practice of some form of collective autonomy, however limited it may be, thus decreases uncertainty – or, as one may prefer to say, shows us the scope of political contingency. On the other hand, the tension between giving the law and following the law, which was historically resolved through domination, now has

to be fully acknowledged. It is now that we can reason on more informed grounds whether progress is possible, or even probable under conditions of autonomy. The answer to this question would provide us with a new understanding of the relation between progress and modernity, beyond the automatism assumed in the strong concept of progress.

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