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The dialectic of critique and progress: Comparing Peter Wagner and Theodor Adorno

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Abstract
As long as critique trails in the wake of progress, a more radical game-changing interest in its reconstruction remains blocked. This article will contrast the reforming approach adopted by Peter Wagner with Theodor Adorno's attempt to reconstruct the normative foundations of historical progress. The intention here is to use the radicalism of Adorno's critical recovery of this ideal in order to clarify and strengthen the social democratic utopianism that underlies Wagner's reconstruction of progress. The final section of the article extends the significance of this modelling of the dialectics between critique and progress, using it to guide a brief evaluation of some attempts to reclaim critique from its histories of complicity in repressive, Eurocentric versions of historical progress.

Keywords
Adorno, critique, Eurocentrism, progress, Wagner

The idea of historical progress that saw the Enlightener Marquis de Condorcet announce that the European population will 'civilize or peacefully remove the savage nations that still occupy vast tracts of its land' (1955: 175) addresses a now dead epoch. Today we might agree with Tzvetan Todorov that '[i]n undertaking to transform the world to make it conform to our need and desire, humankind often calls to mind the sorcerer's apprentice' (2009: 20). For all our dismay, though, at the brutal legacies of an idealized

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'historical progress', Shmuel Eisenstadt's observation that progress is 'the main new element in the cultural constitution of modernity' also remains true for us (2001: 320–40). After all, as we bear witness to the terrible losses and costs of catastrophic modern histories, we testify to the continuing hold of the ideal of a human betterment that is in our own hands. The critique of the self-blindness of historical progress as ideology is mired in confused normativities and performative contradictions. This constitutive element of modernity is constantly re-entangled in its own dogmatisms.

The 'doubt and the hope that things will finally get better, that people will at last be able to breathe a sigh of relief' (Adorno, 1998: 144) are both the essence of progress as faith and as its self-critique. It might be supposed, then, that all that is required of the reconstruction of progress is to delineate and counter-pose a self-blind version with a self-clairvoyant one; excising the pernicious dimensions of the former to leave only the benign residues of the latter. How, though, might the normative foundations of a self-reflexive, accountable, ideal of progress be disentangled from the idealizations that support an irresponsible version? This article will explore the differences between a reforming and a radical interest in the reconstruction of progress to demonstrate their overlapping, and partly complementary, features.

Peter Wagner's recent monograph, *Progress: A Reconstruction* (2016) contrasts sharply with Theodor Adorno's essay entitled 'Progress', that first appeared in the lecture series in 1964–65 (Adorno, 1998). Both are persuaded that the idealization of its rational form might be harvested from the immanent critique of an ideologically driven version. However, each gives a different account of what this involves. Wagner favours a checks and balances approach that seeks to rein in a quasi-automatic, monological perspective on historical development that threatens the complex many-sidedness of modernizing potentials. Refusing to arbitrate on costs, Adorno is repelled by a spirit of compromise that confirms the tolerance for sacrifice that is inbuilt in an ideology of progress. His reclamation of the idea of progress, that 'cannot be conceived as settling for less' (2006: 149) addresses itself to lives that have 'fallen by the wayside', to 'what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped' (1974: 151) the embrace that entwines the victor and the vanquished.

Following the exploration into two distinct, mutually illuminating, attempts to reclaim the ideal of progress for critique, the third section of the article uses the results to reflect upon various accounts of the dialectic between critique and 'progress' that is encountered in several responses of Eurocentric bias in social theory. Turning first to Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (2007), I diagnose the performative contradiction that results when the immanent connection between critique and progress is disavowed. Shmuel Eisenstadt's offer to reclaim a non-ideological account of modernity as progress via his 'multiple modernities' thesis is also shown to fail to provide the normative grounds for critique that might extricate it from settings supplied by a Eurocentric version of historical progress. In contrast to both, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) undertakes to re-negotiate the dialectical relations between critique and 'progress'. Like Wagner, he opts for a trade-off between competing axes in modernizing trajectories and we again call upon Adorno to help us to rethink the normative commitments that underpin this approach to the reconstruction of progress.

Peter Wagner: progress reconstructed

Wagner's reconstructive project seeks to release the emancipatory potentials of the conviction that 'comprehensive improvement, in all respects, was possible for the human condition' from a 'strong' version of progress that disconnects this ambition from direct human agency and confers it with a quasi-automatic agency. Far from signalling the vitality of authentic origins, the strong version distorts the fundamental conviction of 'progress': that our lives ought to be better, and that the task is up to us, and so is its measurement. The normative-evolutionist idea of progress delivered by nineteenth-century modernization is a reworking of the 'invention of progress' that was set in place in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Initially, reason was supposed to give newly principled guidance and justification to judgements about progress in history. Reinhardt Kosselleck's reflections on the Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society confirm the key point. He underlines that the Enlightener's rage against an old Absolutist order in the name of an idealized human autonomy sought to justify itself universally, hence rationally (1988: 7). Wagner stresses that the 'one basic assumption' shared by Enlightenment thinkers is the conviction that 'human beings [are] capable of autonomy and [are] endowed with reason' (2016: 7). Tied to an investment in the expansion of free action, historical progress is not yet identified with a strong philosophy of history. For Kant, it still turned on the conviction that human beings might use their understanding to find an answer to the question of how to live well together in the context of accepting each other's autonomy. Recognizing that, left to itself, human freedom has ambivalent outcomes, Kant, Wagner remarks, supposed that the evaluative powers of reason could be relied upon to determine which of those might advance progressive moments and to use this self-insight as a guide to future action (2016: 80).

Wagner turns to the institutionalization throughout the nineteenth century of modes of thinking that displaced an early semantics of 'progress' that had been seen as the rational justification of free deeds oriented to the future. This was a mindset in which specific institutional conditions of modern freedoms, the political vote and the economic right to buy and sell, were seen as having 'unleashed unintended and unforeseen social dynamics that would need to be taken into account when considering the conditions for progress' (p. 81). Marx, for example, had determined that a set of structures and dynamics mapped the ground that needed to be seized by revolutionary action and Wagner supposes that the tension between the already set direction of history and the open-endedness of human action is 'never entirely absent' from Marx's understanding of human progress (p. 83).

This split thinking about human advancement, divided between the determination of forces inscribed in modern systems and institutions that condition freedoms and the hopes that are invested in free action, has accompanied the ideal of progress since its 'invention' (p. 84). The divide has become more acute, however, and while both dimensions have been attacked by doubts that either one might claim to be the ground of human betterment, each has proposed itself as a strong version of progress as an 'almost self-propelled force of human history'. Exhausted by accumulating disappointments and by self-doubts, the 'grand idea' stumbled and by the late twentieth century, the theme of the 'end of progress' had appeared (Wagner, 2012: 30). This 'end' was not simply a withdrawal from a discredited project whose advertised investment in a better future for the

whole world had turned out to presuppose and advocate on behalf of privileged histories and interests. Nor was the retreat simply the register of a new intolerance at the domination that was inscribed into progress. The 'end of progress' was also testament to the undercutting of certain, seemingly self-evident, measurements of rational development. Here Wagner points to the effect of 'the more recent transformation of organized modernities' in winding back a raft of formal restrictions that had sanctioned unequal power relations (2012: 47; 2016: 144). Regimes of formal domination fall under the full juridical inclusion of previously marginalized populations. The extension of marriage equality in liberal democratic polities as well as hard-won legal protections for women and racial minorities in the last decades illustrate Wagner's point. He goes on to observe that 'there are hardly any colonial societies left, no unfree others who can be formally dominated' (2016: 145).

As the world shakes off formal restrictions, the rational critique of what is taking place loses traction as a protest on behalf of the frustration of the universalization of rights that is demanded by progress in history. 'Autonomy' too is denied its place as a measure of progress when an absence of formal limits is felt as the autonomization of selves who are radically free from the inhibitions of particular contexts of space and time (Wagner, 2016: 117, 119). Domination has only been transformed, though, not eradicated, and Pierre Rosanvallon finds it a 'striking paradox' that a new age of inequality and diminished solidarity has also been a time of increased liberalization and 'tolerance of many kinds of difference' (2013: 222). So the challenge now is to rethink the dialectics of progress and social critique in terms that are adequate to a new landscape that has been denuded of the old benchmarks of achievements. In particular, Wagner calls upon us to respond to a renewal of 'strong' progress that exploits confusions between the end of formal domination and the end of domination as such (2016: 144).

Assuring us that the pathway to expansion of economic freedoms has been cleared of all major inhibitions, neoliberal ideology celebrates the rolling back of formal domination as the return to 'progress as mechanism'. It appears that the resourceful individual only has to 'lean in' to grasp ever-expanding opportunities. Having lost the formal grounds as an immanent critique of progress, critique is emptied of rational contents and so the opportunities continue to roll out, unevaluated with respect to meaning and to consequences. Ruefully observing that what is wrong with this elimination of constraints is difficult to identify for the 'abolition of constraint on human action and of power over human beings appears self-justifying' (2016: 119), Wagner is nevertheless persuaded that the dialectics of progress must be reinvented. This is to be done by reconstructing expectations that might expose the hidden forms of domination that are implicit in the offer of freedoms as open-ended possibilities that are severed from our rational deliberations.

Wagner reflects upon the new form that is being taken by the structural ambivalences of modernity, that has both inaugurated histories of terrible exploitation and oppression 'while, at the same time, serving as reference point for resistance to oppression and struggle for justice' (2015: 3). This time we need to rethink the grounds of critique from the standpoint of the material conditions that sustain domination and oppression. No longer able to simply identify itself as protest at transgressions of formal rights, critique must reconstruct the grounds of its own rationality from the diagnosis of the practical

limits that frustrate concrete individuals as they raise autonomy as the demand to participate in actively determining their own futures. This interpretation of the material requirements of autonomy brings into view our dependencies upon others, not as a necessary limit to, but as the condition of, self-determining lives. While he affirms that the attempt to reconstruct the ideal of progress must 'return to the Enlightenment focus on autonomy', Wagner is also persuaded that 'we need to be more explicit than the Enlightenment thinkers about the ways in which collective autonomy can emerge from personal autonomy' (2016: 153).

This rethinking would enable the self to recognize the domination that is implicit in the blockage of the discursive justification of significant goals of life and to explore the material conditions that realizing these aspirations would require. Along with the concretization of 'autonomy' as a practical ambition of particular selves in contexts, the idealization of reason is to be rescued from abstracted formulations exploited by an affirmative neoliberal mentality (Wagner, 2015: 4). The project of reconstructing progress demands that 'reason' be freed from its ideological role in the self-vindication of the present and restored as the idealization of discursive justification to concrete selves as they weigh trajectories of modernizing development against, sometimes competing, and at times complementary, alternatives.

Against the one-dimensionality of a neoliberal account of progress as a matter of unconstrained economic development, Wagner distinguishes four main axes of modern progress. Progressive development has been strung between: economic growth (progress in the satisfaction of material needs) and epistemic progress (the expansion of scientific knowledge and its usefulness for society) (Wagner, 2016: 26). Progress is also measured in the unprecedented expansion of social freedoms (gains in equality and private freedoms) and in the rapid achievement of political freedoms and rights (cashed out in the 'creation of conditions amenable to personal self-realization') (p. 56). The task of preserving the balance, and activating a mutual testing, between each axis of development against the blind monopolizing ambitions of a single trajectory, provides Wagner with a standard of rational development that is needed to rehabilitate the ideal of progress, releasing it from the grasp of its acquired ideological form. Wagner looks to the interplay between four overlapping trajectories, each of which is able to weigh costs as well as place demands on, and offer complementary support to, rival axes of development. No longer an 'almost self-propelled force of history', progress has to be weighed, reflected upon, and debated: we are again to be the agents and the arbiters (p. 21). Wagner's hopes for a reconstruction of progress excavates the political trajectories of modernizing development to rehabilitate a 'radical commitment to democratic agency' and in doing so contests its deformation by a 'widely used concept of "democratization"', which is severed from the practical demand for rationally self-determined futures, and so 'often entails a decreasing capacity to act politically' (p. 21).

However, Wagner's proposed reconstruction of progress does not seek to replace any one axis that has become dominant in the contest between the four lines of development with a preferred competitor. This is a complex history of complementary, as well as competing, trajectories and he makes the point that to 'flatly reject' the centrality of material progress to modernity 'fails to understand a major dynamics of recent social change' (2012: 21). Wagner's reconstructive project invests in the capacity of each of the

singular and interdependent lines of development to balance and check each other. Immanent standards set by social progress, with its ambition to secure the equitable material conditions that are required by progress in the expansion of political freedoms, demand the rationalization of economic development in terms of its equitable provision of the satisfaction of needs. Wagner is convinced that the reconstruction of progress remains essential and possible 'through building democratic collective agency, overcoming new forms of domination and combating hubris' (2016: 154). It seems that the cultural resources that are needed for a reconstruction of progress as a rational project are ready to hand. The elements that Wagner requires remain in the legacies of a not yet entirely forgotten post-war social democratic reformism whose compromises between capitalism and the democratic state had scoped checks and balances between diverse axes of modern development. There is even space within the social democratic project for the recognition of the co-dependency between private and public autonomy that Wagner insists upon as essential to the task of remaking 'progress' as a measure of our practical ability to realize self-determined futures.

This diagnosis of the normative foundations of a reconstruction of the ideal of progress intersects with Jürgen Habermas's powerful representation of the, never adequately realized, utopianism that underpinned the social democratic project (Habermas, 1989). Born of learning processes set in train by the catastrophic trajectories of the mid-twentieth century, the post-war welfare state project set about securing the institutional arrangements that might ensure that 'the establishment of forms of life that are structured in an egalitarian way and that at the same time open up areas for individual self-realization and spontaneity' (Habermas, 1989: 59). The goals were exceptional, Habermas tells us, however, the bureaucratic methods and the unequal partnership between capitalism and democratic states have perverted the social democratic project, cutting off welfare states from the agenda-setting role of active and diverse civil societies (1996: 429–31). Social democratic repressive facticity remained in a state of high tension with its egalitarian and democratic normativity.

Social democratic utopianism has not fared as well as was hoped and if we are to reclaim the normative ground it staked out, we need to consider why it has proved to be unable to effectively defend itself against aggressively promoted neoliberal rationalities. Wagner's reflections on the reconstruction of progress do not offer enough in this regard. It is not sufficient to suggest that we might go back, acknowledging that more should have be made of the social democratic compromises in normatively balanced modernity. Certainly there is much that, from a current vantage point, makes attractive the idealization of a complexly structured modernity in which economic development is made accountable to other indices of modernization (including the democratic/political and social/egalitarian lines of development). However, as Wagner's own narrative of modernizing development indicates, this patchwork of balances and compromises offers a normatively weak resistance to the strong idealizations that propel mechanistic versions of progress.

Evidently unsettled at remarks by Habermas about his failure to adequately secure the normative foundations for his social critique (Wagner, 2012: 37), it might be supposed that Wagner has styled *Progress: A Reconstruction* as something of a rejoinder. This revisiting of social democracy's idealization of the mutual accountability of the various

axes of progress within an internally divided modernity is a circumspect diagnosis of the normative grounds that is to be occupied by an immanent critique of a monological neoliberalism. There seems little chance, though, that an idealization that has already failed to stand its ground against neoliberal seductions might recover its galvanizing power by a mere return to its original self-understandings. To re-equip it for the ideological battle, social democracy's restrained reformism must also learn to re-imagine its submerged utopian contents. I propose that we might find help from unexpected quarters in scoping this undertaking.

The next section of the article turns to an interpretation of the main themes in Adorno's radical proposal for a rehabilitation of the ideal of historical progress. Certainly Adorno forbids us from looking to a positive utopia that might only provide ideological cover for, and sanction to, social domination. Amy Allen rightly observes that he is 'careful to offer only negativistic accounts of utopia or the good life' (2016: 187). However, the significance of this negativistic outlook in guiding our judgements about what might properly count *as* progress needs to be appreciated also.

Theodor Adorno: progress in the age of catastrophe

Adorno's major essay on 'progress' also invests in the immanent self-criticism of its reference to the ambition of human betterment. His analysis partly works out from reflections upon the improvement of shipping set in motion after the *Titanic* went down.

> Whoever rubs his hands with humility and satisfaction while remembering the sinking of the *Titanic*, because the icebergs supposedly dealt the first blow to the idea of progress forgets or suppresses the fact that this accident, which incidentally was by no means fateful, occasioned measures that in the following half century protected sea voyages from unplanned natural catastrophes. (1998: 154)

A reactivation of the self-critique at the heart of 'progress' requires that reason be wrenched from its role in the self-vindication of a reified present that has abandoned any ambition to make us the arbiter of our futures. Instead, reason must be returned to the modesty of the mere means by which domination-free ways of living and interacting represent their legitimacy and their justice. For,

> [t]he notion of the domination of pure reason as a being-in-itself, separated from praxis, subjugates even the subject, deforms it into an instrument to be used toward an end. The beneficial self-reflection of reason, however, would be its transition to praxis: reason would see through itself as a moment of praxis and would recognize, instead of mistaking itself for the absolute, that it is a mode of behaviour. (p. 153)

Far from offering its 'strong' version, it turns out that 'progress as mechanism' represents an ideological deformation in which continual reproduction of the same is misrepresented as a developmental logic. 'The more the system expands, the more it hardens into what it has always been' (p. 160), and Adorno wants to expose this as a 'moment of praxis' that allows the privileged to represent the reproduction of the present as a

dynamic, developmental logic. This diagnosis introduces a vital ideology-critical dimension into Adorno's account of the task of reinventing progress that is missing from Wagner's modestly reconstructive project. For Adorno, the ideal of progress is to be wrested from its ideological entanglements and returned as a demand on behalf of the 'damaged life'. This repositioning would lay claim to the truth of progress as action that has as its reference and its measure a better life for all of us. As Adorno sees it, '[o]nly those reflections about progress have truth that immerse themselves in progress and yet maintain distance withdrawing from paralyzing facts and specialized meanings' (p. 140). Progress is to set out its claims among the ruins. Part of the dialectic of progress is that historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress,

> also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future. The nexus of deception surrounding progress reaches beyond itself. It is mediated to that order in which the category of progress would first gain its justification, in that the devastation wrought by progress could be made good again, if at all, only by its own forces, never by the restoration of the proceeding conditions that were its victim. (p. 150)

This 'making good again' cannot be achieved by a present that addresses the sacrifices of damaged life as collateral costs, nor does it look to the restoration of times before blind progress hacked its way into the present. Repudiating both options, Adorno's conviction that we must appeal to the 'category of progress' to heave us out of the 'devastation' wrought by it clearly references main themes in Walter Benjamin's powerful critique of a progressivist reading of history.

As is well known, Benjamin's ninth Thesis in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is a study of Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus'. The painting 'shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating'. The Angel would like to stay and 'make whole what has been smashed' but a storm 'blowing from paradise' irresistibly 'propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress' (Benjamin, 1970: 159–60). Spun around and no longer heedless of the catastrophic results of what we have been doing, yet without the strength needed to resist the compulsive dynamism that 'we call progress' and so linger with the wounded, the Angel is carried forward, facing backwards, into the future.

Michael Lowy's reading of Benjamin's ninth Thesis underlines the lonely impotence of the Angel. Benjamin's Angel of History, 'would like to halt, to bind the wounds of the victims crushed beneath the pile of ruins, but the storm carries it on inexorably towards the repetition of the past: to new catastrophes, new hetacombs, ever vaster and more destructive' (2005: 64). For Benjamin, it seems that the only saving power that is yielded by the storm is the unforced insight of a new historical attentiveness to the sufferings of the past. According to one commentator, for Benjamin, '[t]he images of historical debris are the involuntary flashes or shocks of past historical suffering that explode the myth of temporal continuum. The claims that these scenes exercise over us oblige us to respond to the utopian dreams of the past' (Grumley, 2015: 8). For Adorno too, if we are to save ourselves and arrest our headlong rush through histories of accumulating disasters, we cannot fall back on a weak spirit of compromise whose determination to make the

devastation 'good again' ensures that they will occur again. If it is to become effective, the Angel's pitying gaze must harden into a judging resolve. What we call progress must address itself 'to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside- what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped' (Adorno, 1974: 151).

With Adorno, we can only conclude that we are, again and still, at the point of contemplating whether humanity is capable of preventing total catastrophe and can find the strength to break with the continuum. Faced with a world torn apart by the suffering of refugees and disastrous climate change, we cannot keep going on much as we always have. Adorno tells us that nothing less than the re-invention of the humanity that is to be the measure of historical progress is required. Now,

> [t]he forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life if a self conscious global subject does not develop and intervene. The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, have migrated to this global subject alone. Everything else involving progress must crystallize around it. (1998: 144)

Lacking the omnipotence and omniscience of divine powers, we remain captive to our own contingent particularity. Yet there remains a saving power in the turn of the Angel's head from the untruths of ideology and in his inability to look away from the damaged lives left by the storm. This self-consciousness of a 'global subject' that cannot finally inoculate itself from a sense of responsibility to the suffering of others is not a transcendent power but is the immanent resources we have to hand every day. In Benjamin's phrase, a 'slight adjustment' is required to wrest the ambition of human betterment from the blind zealot, restoring it to the self-understandings of concrete human beings as they discover their humanity lingering among their suffering inability to finally surrender their concrete particularity to only abstract, inhuman goods.

Perhaps Adorno is rather more comfortable with the positivity of the idea of a global subject that finds its humanity in the solidarity of 'things that have fallen by the wayside' than Benjamin ever was (Y Vazquez-Arroyo, 2008: 455–6). Even so, both build out from a shared mistrust of the Hegelian dialectic that offers to absolve suffering particularity. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* offers itself as a reinvention, not just denial of universal history (Y Vazquez-Arroyo, 2008: 458–61). This comes across in the following often-cited passage.

> Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it. Not to be denied for that reason, however, is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history – the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men's inner nature. (Adorno, 1973: 320)

The 'not to be denied' dialectic takes critique into the heart of the principle of progress. Our capacity to plan for a better world must be wrested from the ambition of the abstract

subject to dominate others and the concrete self and returned as a responsibility and as an assurance to the suffering of those who have sidelined.

As Adorno sees it, reforming calculations that weigh costs and balance axes of development against each other fail to break with the logic of sacrifice that is embraced by an affirmative dialectic. Wagner, in turn, might suppose that Adorno's appeal to 'the global subject' revisits abstract revolutionary hopes that remain enmeshed within the 'storm' of progress, even as he determines to place this ideal in the hands of concrete, suffering human beings, as its measure and its arbiter. Perhaps, though, there is something to be gained by each standpoint if it opens itself up to review by the other. Adorno's intervention exposes traces of an ideological 'God's eye view' in Wagner's practically oriented checks and balances approach whose weak ambition to 'make things good again' does not break with the tolerance of sacrifices demanded by progress. If Adorno's intervention is allowed to excavate further this normatively weak social democratic ambition, we might recover something of the ideal of a 'global subject' that has remained dormant in social democracy's vague timidity about its utopianism. Going down this road, the task of reconstructing progress might include recognition of the revolutionary character of social democracy's own, now virtually repressed, demand that the egalitarian and libertarian principles of a liberal polity do not merely reference an already secured private autonomy. Understanding better its own utopia would mean that the social democratic project would not simply target remedial 'safety net' reforms at those who have failed capitalism's unforgiving equation between autonomy with a fictious self-sufficiency. We look instead to an image of the human that exposes the fiction and reflects upon autonomy as the self-insight into our needy dependencies that is opened up as we explore the material conditions of our freedoms. The ontological ground that has been occupied without the necessary self-consciousness by the social democratic project is brought into view in Adorno's reflections that '[a]s little as humanity *tel quel* progresses by the advertising slogan of the ever new and improved, so little can there be of the idea of progress without humanity' (1998: 145).

If a hoped-for return to social democratic idealizations of progress is to do better than offer up the 'new and improved' that promises to be more of the same, an ideological struggle with neoliberal ontologies cannot be avoided. To the point, a neoliberal rationality that reduces the self to a resource for an historical progress that is modelled after the semblance of quasi-automatic market mechanisms must be held to account as an ideological representation of our humanity. This image-making must be exposed as an ontologization of the liberal idea of the self-sufficient subject who is swept along, sometimes with supporting fixtures, into the developmental logics of history. If this ideological nut is to be cracked, the hold that the ideal of the autonomy of the completed self, frozen into the pre-set moulds supplied by a future-oriented society must be challenged. Certainly, a radical rethinking of the 'always already' autonomy of the liberal subject is indicated in Wagner's representation of the task of reconstructing of progress. As we have seen, his proposal for the democratization of the political/democratic axis of modernization requires that private autonomy be connected, via the practical demand for securing its own conditions, to the recognition of its interdependencies with the social and political grounds of public freedoms. However, this reworking of autonomy fails to make its challenge to a liberal idealization of self-sufficient subjectivity into an explicit

reconceptualization of the humanity that is to be the measure of historical progress. Faltering at the normative threshold of its own revolutionary significance, social democratic utopianism permits an idealization of needy, suffering humanity to inform a mere 'safety net', reform agenda for those who have 'fallen by the wayside' and thus leaves intact the image of the normalcy of a self-sustaining private individual.

If social democracy is to assert itself as a robust utopianism that is able to galvanize loyalties and challenge neoliberal distortions, a clarified self-understanding of its normativities is required and Adorno (who always drastically underestimated social democracy) can help. If the new normativity is to be claimed, suffering individuality can no longer tolerate its containment as a retarded state that must be relieved by its conversion into self-sustaining autonomy. Hurts and frustrations can be the faint signals of a humanity that has not yet squeezed itself into the crucibles that progress demands. A social democratic utopianism might put itself, then, in the service of a 'global subject' whose traces appear whenever the concrete life affirms that it cannot, without damaging itself further, submit to the falsifications of pre-given freedoms that require that each learn to shift for him/herself. The social democratic project lifts itself into oppositional ideological territory as it refuses to continue as a remedial undertaking to simply put the damaged life back on it feet. Instead it can collaborate with us as we struggle to resist the distortions of freedoms that mould us in their image, by attending to the disappointed hopes and frustrations of the damaged life. A dimly shared apprehension that our hurts might guide us to not yet extinguished needs and to the 'doubt and hope that things will get better' requires supporting civic cultures and social institutions that do not bear down with pre-set measures of progress. Only by placing itself in the service of a radically democratized rethinking of progress, that embraces critique not as its carping outsider but as its measure and its guide, can a transformed social democratic utopianism hope to invade the ideological territory occupied by a neoliberal rationality, that is all too willing to reach down, and lift up to renewed efforts, the wayside dwellers.

An investigation into the complementary, not just contradictory, differences between Wagner and Adorno's shared interest in reclaiming progress for critique generates some insights into social democracy's underdone utopianism. However, the undertaking to reconstruct the idea of historical progress resists the ideological limitations of a merely parochial interest. While I share Allen's concern that theoretical reflections upon the dialectic between critique and progress must reach out to unite with the preoccupations of postcolonial theory, this article puts the project of her *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2016) into reverse. Instead of interrogating the critical theorist's reflections upon progress and critique via the demands of postcolonial theory, I will use insights gleaned about the task of a normative re-scoping of 'progress' found within debates over its critical reconstruction to probe various accounts of the dialectic between critique and progress that inform several postcolonial theories.

The dialectics of progress and critique: challenges to Eurocentric social theory

A spirited case for the retrieval of texts that have been written out of Eurocentric social science, Connell's (2007) *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in*

Social Science finds that sociology has been dominated by an ideology of 'progress' that is designed to vindicate, first, colonial, and now neoliberal, powers. Opting not to jettison universalizing categories in the social sciences, only to extricate them from legitimating purposes, Connell believes that we can and must construct 'social theory that does not claim universality for a metropolitan point of view, does not reach only from one direction, does not exclude the experience and social thought of most of humanity and is not constructed on *terra nullius*' (2007: 47).

An ideology of progress that is inscribed into the comparative foundations of classical sociological theory has, Connell tells us, stacked its decks from the beginning. Entitled 'Empire and the Creation of Social Science', Connell's opening chapter offers a sceptical account of the 'myth' of sociology's founding fathers. Sociology 'was formed within the culture of imperialism, and embodied an intellectual response to the colonized world. We learn that this fact is crucial in understanding the content and the method of sociology, as well as the discipline's wider cultural significance' (p. 9). This ideological purpose has carried through into the 'northern' presumptions of the social sciences, for 'by the time sociology was institutionalized in the final decade of the century, the central proof of progress – and therefore the main intellectual ground on which the new social science rested – was the contrast of metropolitan and colonized societies' (p. 10).

For our purposes, there is not much to be gained by debating Connell's account of the ideological foundations and thrust of a sociological project. However, something needs to be said about her discounting of the hermeneutical sensitivities of the main exemplars of classical sociological theory that brought the dialectics between progress and critique into view for this 'science of progress'. For Connell, it was the assumptions about historical progress, rather than avowedly racist ideologies, that structured sociology's Eurocentric bias. 'The point is . . . that racial hierarchy on a world scale was a perception built into the concept of "progress", and was a central part of what sociology was thought to be about' (p. 10). Max Weber, to focus on one paradigmatic exemplar of 'northern' social sciences, always referred to his field of inquiry as a 'universal history of culture'. However, for Weber, this meant an inquiry into the grounds upon which rational *judgements* concerning historical progress might be made. Weber's essay on 'Objectivity in the Social Sciences' (1949) should be read as an opening move in a comparative project that, in laying the grounds of a distinctive philosophical anthropology, outlines the interpretive frame of reference for his case studies and his concrete analyses. This search for a philosophical anthropology intends to block an ideological universalism that reads outwards from the centre, so as to permit a 'global subject' to recognize itself in the participation of cultural beings everywhere in purposeful orientations to the world that are embedded in the dense particularity of cultural histories. Weber proposes that

> [t]he transcendental presupposition of every *cultural science* lies not in our finding a certain culture or any 'culture' to be *valuable* but in the fact that we are *cultural human beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance .(1949: 81)

Certainly there is a scale of value in this philosophical foundation that might well be prejudiced in favour of those civilizations that allow the fullest, formal expression to its

self-consciously universal reach. However, this assumption of privilege is surely undercut again by the wry circumspection that saw Weber, on another occasion, take a dig at a self-important Western narrative of historical progress that 'as we at least like to think' is authorized to claim universality(Weber, 1948). At issue is not only the observation that classical sociology, sometimes, shares Connell's aversion to a social science that reads 'progress' with a northern bias. The more telling point is that, unlike Connell, Weber insists that sociological theory needs to construct a substantive measure of human progress that can compete with and expose the self-blindness of a narrowly ideological version. Hostile to any bid to re-theorize its normative grounds, Connell proposes to, somehow, wrest critique from the ideological bias that 'progress', ineluctably it seems, imports into the universalizing frameworks that have been adopted by self-blind, Eurocentric sociological theories.

Talcott Parsons' modernization theory stands guardian to a narrative that reduces sociology's interest in progress to the worldwide convergence of processes, trends and idealizations that started in the West. Connell's critique of the prejudicial assumptions carried first by classical and now by sociological theory in general is not limited to specific discoveries of covert ideological biases. It is directed, rather, towards the genre of generalizing social theory itself. She targets 'theorising that tries to formulate a broad vision of the social, and offers concepts that apply beyond a particular society, place or time' (Connell, 2007). Connell is worried that the abstracted character of general theory invites parochial assumptions to cloak themselves in its, supposedly, universal categories and so parade as legitimate arbiters on the marginality of 'the experience and social thought of most of humanity'. To block this ideological contamination of a pretentious, myopic 'northern theory', we are to turn to 'dirty theory', to 'theory that is mixed up with specific situations' (Connell, 2007: 207).

Relieved of the normative burdens of an investment in historical progress, 'general theory' is to be restricted to a set of rules and principles that are governed by a merely technical interest in social scientific objectivity. Generalization, we learn, remains vital in 'communication, the testing of claims in the search for new data, in the application and the use of knowledge, in the capacity for knowledge to grow' (Connell, 2007). Theory is not to 'subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from the outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness'. Connell is persuaded that an epistemologically restrained 'dirty' social science alone is able to deliver a critical orientation and she refers us to Veena Das's (1995) *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* to illustrate the point. We are assured that this deconstructive social science permits self-expression to the pain and the suffering of the dispossessed by breaking through the imposed representations of the violence of the Partition that accompanies a social scientific interest in categorizing experiences under its 'monopolies of truth' (Das, 1995: 180–1). However, as long as it is not re-attached to an answering idealization of historical progress, it appears that epistemological restraint cannot do much to relieve the social sciences of the ideological influence of modernization theory. After all, ideologies of historical progress can contemplate with equanimity expressions of suffering under its logic of sacrifice and so such expressions may only represent themselves as effective critique when they aim at a version of historical progress that refuses the toxic equation between suffering and sacrifice.

Connell endorses Ashis Nandy's reflections upon the humanistic project of contemporary sociology. 'No vision of the future can ignore that institutional suffering touches the deepest core of human beings, and that societies must work through the culture and psychology of such suffering, in addition to its politics and economics' (Nandy, cited by Connell, 2007: 189–90). However, if this 'working through' is to defy the partnership of domination and sacrifice that suffocates critique, a new unity that 'cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history' must be found (Adorno, 1998: 48). Connell, who repudiates the very idea of progress, refuses the search for the normative foundations that could support the expression of suffering, concrete humanity as the reference and the measure, not just the residue, of progress. She is not alone, though, in failing to push the quest for new normative foundations through, and in doing so reinstating critique in malcontent partnership with an unreconstructed ideal of progress.

We noted earlier that for Eisenstadt 'progress' cannot be disavowed: it is the 'constitutive new element' of modernity. To briefly summarize its intent, the 'multiple modernities' thesis wants to problematize the presumption of convergence in Parsons' modernization theory by theorizing the plurality of cultural responses to European expansion across the globe (Eisenstadt, 2000). After all, some regions did draw upon deep indigenous cultures to provide points of translatability that were be offered back as resistances to the 'modernizing invasion'. Eisenstadt's inquiries into the foundations of resistant cultural forms that were able to reply to a hegemonic mode of modernization take him, with the help of Karl Jaspers, back to the great Eurasian centres of the Axial Age (to classical Greece, Confucian China, Buddha in India and Hebrew prophecy) from 800 BC to 200 BC. Eisenstadt observes that the new ontological division between a mundane and a transcendent order that distinguished the Axial Age opened up the domain of human affairs to judgements from a sphere of higher purposes. This enabled new cultural sensibilities about humans' capacities to change their world for the better and ushered in ideas about the accountability of rulers to higher purposes.

For Eisenstadt, modernity does not simply carry forward the cultural premises of the Axial Age. He draws attention to modernizing transformations in the Axial tension between transcendental and mundane orders that were redirected towards a radical vision of human autonomy and relocated in a thoroughly 'this worldly' and activist turn. Observing that the cultural programme of Western Christendom has been modernity's spearhead, nonetheless, Eisenstadt refuses to concede undisputed cultural monopoly to it. Modernity is a 'civilization' in the sense that it embraces the cultural programme of self-transformative societies that aspire to new social orders guided by their own ideological visions. Accordingly, as the West attempts to impose *its* modernity across the globe, it is sometimes reinvented and resisted by the 'cultural surpluses' it encounters. Eisenstadt supposes, for example, that modern fundamentalisms have combined a Jacobin version of politics as a vehicle for total reconstruction with a dependence on religious traditions of Axial origins that they express in new ideological terms (Arnason, 2003: 175).

Eisenstadt's representation of the 'self-transformative' society as *the* cultural project of modernity supplies an idealization that can be laid claim to by all manner of politico–social configurations in the modern world. However, this is unable to supply critique

with its rational grounds. In the end, the 'multiple modernities' thesis remains empty of normative contents that might be used to arbitrate on competing claims to offer the 'best' representation of modernity's constitutive idealization of historical progress. Backing off from the hard task of providing the grounds for a rational arbitration of the value and worth of any particular version of historical progress, the merely pluralistic perspective of the multiple modernities thesis permits such claims to be driven by an uninterrogated will to power.

Wagner's proposed 'world sociology of modernity' objects to the 'multiple modernities' thesis as a reconstruction of a common project whose normativity is too thinly stretched to avoid its collapse into an a-critical relativism (2012: 156–7). He proposes to replace this one-dimensional foundation with a set of basic '*problématiques*' that 'human beings have tried to address collectively at various places and points of time' (p. 154). The methodology for the 'world sociology of modernity' is to excavate the deep, shared ontological foundations of various, apparently parochial, cultural self-understandings and in doing so to uncover common cause between them. Wagner intends to illustrate the point by suggesting that Eurocentric presumptions that a non-western self-understanding lacks 'a concept of the individual' can be unmasked by reconstructing a unifying ontological conception that 'there are physical human beings that necessarily entertain social relations with others' and an agreement that 'the controversy is about the degree to which these physical human beings should be conceptually separated as knowing and acting subjects' (p. 155). Here we see Wagner's timidity when faced with the normative challenges that confront the critical rethinking of 'progress' united with a boldly positive account of the ontological foundations of a putative universal interest in the self-understanding of individual/social interactions. However, the purported cultural/ideological innocence of this latter undertaking presupposes an, unacknowledged, arbitration about what is to count as historical progress. After all, the abstracted thinking that informs the *interest* in conceptualizing human '*problématiques*' itself presupposes certain kinds of cultural orientations and motivations that Wagner reads back into a positive ontology. It appears that the normative vacuum about historical progress challenged in the multiple modernities thesis is reproduced by Wagner. This vacuum offers itself up to contents re-insinuated by an unthinking Eurocentric version of 'progress' that is the explicit object of the critique.

Embracing the challenge of identifying autonomous normative foundations for a critical, postcolonial social theory, Chakrabarty's (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* promises to fill a conceptual gap left by both Connell's rejection of progress as ideology and by the foundational significance that Eisenstadt gives to it. *Provincializing Europe* boldly asserts that European Enlightenment thinking might be able to make good its universalizing pretensions via a reconstruction of dialectical intersections with cultural potentials in subaltern histories. European Enlightenment is to be reduced to a mere provincial articulation of its own generalizing principles and so these aspirations will be freed to reconnect with a multiplicity of complementary modernizing legacies within other cultures.

Chakrabarty's response to a Eurocentric idealization of progress affirms the precepts of Enlightenment, 'the ideals of citizenship, equality before the law, the individual popular justice and scientific rationality', as 'now everybody's heritage'. However,

while this South Asian historian insists that 'modern critiques of caste, oppressions of women, lack of rights for women in India . . . are unthinkable except for the legacy of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 4), he also supposes that their mere application to subaltern histories invariably confirms the latter, in the colonialist mindset, as not ready to be their full bearers. Chakrabarty reflects upon the long, bitter, on-going, struggles to turn an ideology of a colonialist paradigm of historical progress into a critical, emancipatory one. Refusing the colonizer's 'not yet', the nationalists demanded the 'now' urgency of the democratization of Indian civil and political institutions. Bucking the colonial narrative, elective Indian histories have sometimes been stung into claiming their place alongside European idealizations as particular contributions to the meaning of an enlightened modernity. To illustrate the point, Chakrabarty reflects upon the coeval contributions that were made by principles of civil and political rights and deeply ingrained Hindu legacies in galvanizing a mid-nineteenth-century reform movement against the practice of Sati. In this case, Enlightenment thinking, with its conviction that the intervention of a principled reason would unlock a natural sympathy that had been blocked by habit and custom, joined forces with a culture of *hriday*, the overflowing, compassionate 'heart', that also suffused Bengali history(Chakrabarty, 2000: 124).

It ought not to be expected, though, that Connell would find compelling grounds here for easing up on her strong critique of historical progress as the peddler of a 'northern' bias in the social sciences. After all, Chakrabarty's proposal that we keep in front of us an abstracted commitment to Enlightenment idealizations of rational and free interactions that are 'provincialized' via their multiple interpretations and appropriations finally does nothing much to dislodge a trumping European idealization of the trajectories of historical progress. The key point here is not only, as Chakrabarty later admits, because 'one never experiences being a concept', the bid to preserve an abstracted idealization of Enlightenment thinking that somehow stands above and offers equal access to its particular cultural appropriations does not make good sense (2009: 220). A stronger objection is that the very proposition that we might appeal to abstracted ideals about the rationality of progressive trajectories in human history does nothing to dislodge the trumping role claimed by a Eurocentric version of Enlightenment that registers its peculiar cultural appropriation precisely through the formality of these principled commitments.

If, with Connell, we are to critique the presumptions of a version of historical progress that reads 'from only one direction' and so excludes 'the experience and social thought of most of humanity', we cannot shirk the task, grasped, entirely differently, by Weber and by Adorno, of reconstructing an idealization of human betterment that allows peripheral experiences and knowledges to protest their marginalization in terms that do not implicitly confirm it. We saw that Adorno refuses to allow progress and critique a comfortable symmetry in which the former provides the vantage point for a lamenting reconciliation with the suffering of those have 'fallen by the wayside'. For him, the 'global subject' recognizes itself in the common cause of wayside dwellers and damaged lives who lay claim to, and offer guidance for, the hope that things will progress as they explore the eradicable grounds of their sufferings and their frustrations.

Conclusion: a critical humanist reconstruction of 'progress'?

Published in 1947, Martin Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' exposed humanism's radical will to transcendence as a metaphysic of domination that claims sanction via its appeal to 'the essence of man' (1978 [1947]). This attack called for the end of the humanist project itself. This was drastic overkill. Notwithstanding the forces that have abused it as a prideful will to domination and the powerful critiques that have pronounced it to be dead, an earthly idealization of humanizing progress refuses to banish itself. It remains as modernity's intractable 'constitutive' element and so we are called upon to rethink it in terms that affirm our humanness in all its concreteness and variety. I have argued that this rethinking requires the severing, and then the reconstruction, of the dialectic between progress and critique in terms that were neglected by Wagner and recognized by Adorno. This radical rethinking of the relationship would position critique as a usurper that refuses to restrict its claims to the demand that collateral damages be redressed and offered a place within the developmental logic that had cast them off. Instead, critique offers itself as the impetus for a unifying self-consciousness of a 'mere' humanity that lurks in those events and circumstances that force upon us a self-awareness of our private insufficiencies with respect to securing the conditions of our freedoms.

The limitations of a reconstruction of 'progress' that fails to rethink its dialectical relationship with critique became apparent as we contrasted the approaches offered by Wagner and Adorno. Wagner's interest in reconstructing 'progress' on behalf of lives that have been damaged under the imperatives of its 'strong' version seemingly *requires* a radical rethinking of the dialectic that might break the sympathetic partnership between progress and the sufferings of those who have been sacrificed. However, we saw that Wagner's reforming temperament falters before the radicalism of the task and so his analysis implicitly reproduces the logic of sacrifice that it openly protests against. However, the point was also made that Adorno's bold rethinking of the dialectic between critique and the ideal of progress is not actually at war with Wagner's social democratic reformism. Indeed, we are able to recruit Adorno's radical approach to the 'humanity' that calls upon the activism of 'progress' in order to obtain some insight into the normative battlefield that social democratic reformism, mostly unknowingly, occupies.

Susan Buck-Morss champions a 'new' humanist normativity that is to be retrieved by a negative version of dialectical thinking that refuses to subsume concrete particularity into pre-existing conceptual frameworks (2009: xii). Her admired study *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* reflects upon the slave revolt in eighteenth-century Saint-Dominique, that established Haiti as the first independent black nation, as a challenge to a positive dialectics that intends to subsume concrete histories within a universal movement. A dialectical image at the centre of this revisiting describes the bewildered reaction of French soldiers who, on hearing the rebellious slaves singing their own revolutionary anthem, questioned whether they were fighting on the wrong side. Resisting the derivative, ultimately insufficiently critical, normativity that haunts Chakrabarty's search for subaltern contributions to Enlightenment universalism, as Buck-Morss sees it, '[t]he Haitian Revolution was the crucible, the trial by fire for the ideals of the French Enlightenment' (2009: 42). This would be no merely hoped-for inclusion into settled liberties

and achieved fraternities by the damaged life. Instead, a 'revolution from below' threatened the ideological supports for, and so the material conditions of, Enlightenment Europe. For, '[t]he unfolding of the logic of freedom in the colonies threatened to unravel the total institutional framework of the slave economy that supported such a substantial part of the French Bourgeoisie, whose political revolution, of course, this was'(p. 41). No simple re-appropriation of Enlightenment universalism, the revolution of the slaves of Saint-Dominique exploded its very meaning as a demand to become free 'not just in thought but *in the world*' (p. 61). Back home in the factories of the brutal trading companies, the courts could not recognize English and Scottish workers as industrial slaves because 'a worker who accepted token wages could be defined as free, even if in fact he remained perpetually dependent' (p. 100). As long as a slave economy remained in force across the other side of the world, the factory workers of Europe 'bound for life' in punishing wage slavery could be represented 'in thought' as 'free labor'.

So the Saint-Dominique revolt against the *essentially* inhuman experience of modern slavery was able to 'give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits' (p. 100). This was not just a demand to 'catch up' that would dissolve into the horizons of already described freedoms. Instead it must be reclaimed as a rupture of the divisive logic of an ideological regime that could expose us empathetically to the raw, free, vulnerability of our collective humanity.

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