

Societal Progress

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Definition

Societal progress is a normative concept and can be defined as the change or advancement of major conditions of societies and people's lives in a direction considered to be desirable based on prevailing values and goals of development. Thus, in the retrospect progress means that present conditions of life and society are considered as an improvement compared to the past, in the prospect it means that future conditions are envisaged to be better than those of present times.

Description

While the "demise of the idea of progress" had been noticed several years ago (Sztompka 1994: 33), the concept has seen a surprising and remarkable revival more recently. The renewed interest in the concept of progress is closely related to the currently flourishing debate on measuring well-being "beyond GDP" and thus to alternative approaches of defining and measuring betterments of people's living conditions, societal characteristics and life quality in ways, which are at least not restricted to economic terms. Particularly the "OECD - Global Project on Measuring the *Progress of Societies*" as well as recommendations of the so-called 'Stiglitz Commission' on the "Measurement of Economic Performance and *Social Progress*" (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi 2010) have stimulated a new debate on societal progress and its meaning in our present times.

History

Although it has been shown that the idea of directed change towards better human conditions is ancient and can be traced back to Greek and Roman philosophers (Nisbet 1980), the concept of progress is usually considered to be a child of the age of enlightenment and modern times. Characterized by a strong belief in the power of human reason, the gradual replacement of religious and traditional beliefs by scientific thinking as well as the fights for civil rights and liberties, the age of enlightenment gave birth to optimistic views of being capable to shape and improve human conditions and thus promoted the idea of and hope for progress. As a representative of this age, the French philosopher and politician Marquis de Condorcet saw "the human race, freed from its chains and marching with a firm tread on the road of truth and virtue and happiness" (see Bossard 1931/1932: 8). The notion of progress thus became a characteristic if not 'trademark' of modernity, flourishing particularly during the industrial age, and it was not least closely related to working class movements, unions, and political parties aiming to improve working and living conditions of employees and their families successfully.

In social theory the notions and ideas of progress have always played a crucial role, beginning with the works of Comte and Spencer until our present times, although in varying intensity. For example, the concept of progress was explicitly addressed in a series of articles published in the Journal "Social Forces" during the 1930s. In one of those articles, Bossard (1931/32: 14) interestingly characterizes progress as a "term, which is used to indicate a consciousness of movement in a given direction, considered at the time to be desirable. There are involved ..not one, but three ideas in the modern concept of progress: the idea of change, ...the idea of valuation, and ...the idea of control". More recently scholars as prominent as Jeffrey Alexander, Piotr Sztompka (1990), Claus Offe (2011) and many others have taken up the issue again with major contributions to clarify the concept and to discuss its present day meanings.

Conceptual issues

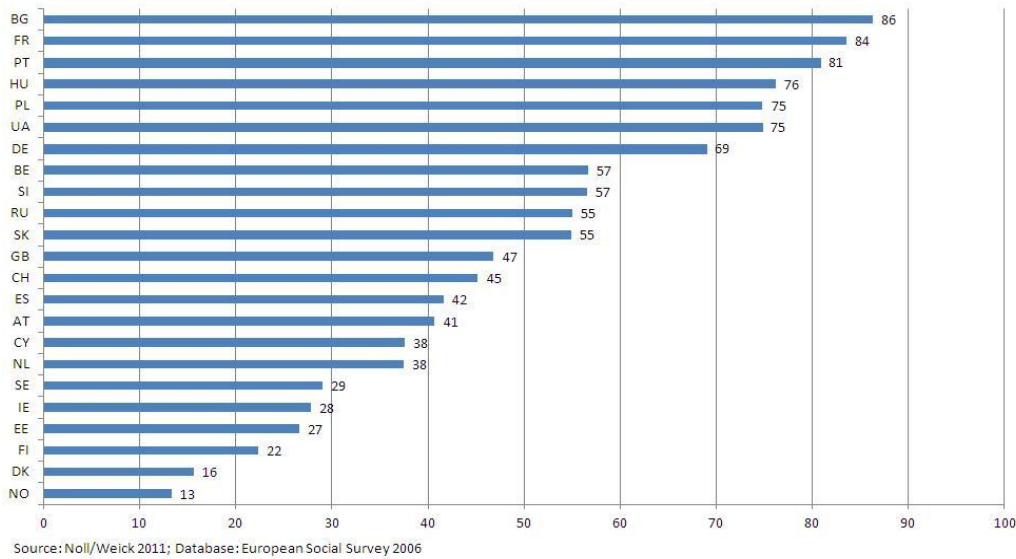
The concept of progress has been used in different notions, changing over time. There is a common understanding however, that progress indicates a directional valued social or societal change, which is to be distinguished clearly from other sorts of societal developments like neutral change, stagnation, cyclical change, or regress. Beyond this basis notion, the literature exhibits numerous differences in ways of understanding and attributing basic characteristics to the concept of progress. According to Sztompka (1994: 27ff.), important variations in the understanding and usage of the concept of progress are related to basic components, such as the 'shape of the process', the 'necessity' of progress, the 'manner of operation', and the 'moving forces': Regarding the shape of the process, approaches understanding progress as continuous, gradual, cumulative or even linear changes towards better states of society may be distinguished from understandings of progress as a stepwise, incremental, uneven or eventually even revolutionary process. While progress may be considered a necessity in the course of history, at least in the long run, as for example suggested by Marxist approaches, but eventually also by modernization theory, it may also be regarded as a possibility or chance only, which must not necessarily occur. A third variation in the understanding of progress concerns the 'manner of operation': While progress can be understood as an outcome of an harmonious unfolding of inherent potentials and thus a peaceful process, it may also be considered a result of tensions, contradictions, conflict and fights, as for example proposed in Marxist theory. Another important distinction concerns the forces bringing progress about: Is progress considered as a result of unintended processes, as for example evolution and market activities, or even side effects of certain forces, or is progress deemed to be the result of human agency, which has to be aimed at and to be achieved. Offe (2011: 79) for example represents the latter view, proposing an understanding of progress as "the outcome of collective intentional efforts driven by reason" and "not the evolutionary outcome of the blind forces of change". Sztompka arrives at the conclusion of a new conceptualization of progress "(1) as a potential capacity, rather than ultimate achievement, (2) as a dynamic, evolving, relative quality of a concrete process, rather than absolute, universal, external standard, (3) as a historical possibility, opportunity, open option rather than necessary, inevitable, inexorable tendency, (4) as a product - often unintended, and even unrecognized - of human pluralistic and collective actions, rather than a result of divine will, good intentions of exceptional individuals, or operation of automatic social mechanisms" (Sztompka 1990: 251).

Current views and discourses

The period of 'triumphant modernity' has been considered by many observers as the 'true' era of societal and social progress. Particularly in the second half of the 20th century citizens of many nations - primarily in the so-called Western World - enjoyed unprecedented betterments of living conditions and quality of life: substantial reductions of working hours and increase in leisure time, improved working conditions, expanded welfare state regulations and benefits, better education for large parts of the population, rising incomes and living standards, advanced health and extended longevity, to name just a few. All these developments were unequivocally welcomed as improvements and considered as progress by the large majority of the populations almost everywhere. More recent societal developments in European and other well-off Western nations however seem to undermine the notion of progress: stagnating or even decreasing real incomes, increasing inequalities, growth of poverty and 'the working poor', expansion of precarious jobs and working conditions, and the dismantling of welfare state institutions and cutbacks in welfare state benefits are some of the changes observed in various nations raising doubts about the progressive character of current societal developments. These doubts have also been fueled by numerous negative side effects of the raising material level of living in many societies, such as environmental impairments, but also strain and stress or even mental illness (Eckersley 2008). Even if changes seem to be positive and progressive at first glance, it is not always clear whether or not they are making life ultimately really better, as for example the debate about the quality of the additional life years resulting from extended longevity has demonstrated impressively. Moreover, there are good reasons to assume, that the social consensus about the elements of a 'good life' and the desirable directions of social change have weakened due to a differentiation of needs and a pluralization of value orientations and life styles. Given this background, it is perhaps not too surprising, that considerable parts or even majorities of the populations in many European societies recently assessed the changes of the social situation in their countries in a way that 'life is getting worse', perceiving a decline of their quality of life rather than improvements and progress. Results from the European Social Survey 2006 suggest, that more than 50 % of the respondents in eleven of the 23 nations covered 'agree' or 'strongly' agree that "for most people in their country life is getting worse" (Figure 1). In some countries this percentage even extends 80 %.

The prevailing scepticism and pessimism in contemporary theoretical discourses on progress are to a considerable degree due to postmodernism and related views of history and social change. As Giddens (1993: 665) put it, "modern societies...took their inspiration from the idea that history has a 'shape' - it 'goes somewhere', and leads to 'progress'. ...The advocates of the idea of postmodernity suggest today that this notion has collapsed". Also Marshall notices a significant change in the attitude toward progress in the postmodern age: "For most of the twentieth century, theories of progress followed the pattern of the nineteenth - optimistic, rationalistic, materialistic. ... At the century's end, however, the idea of progress seems to be in eclipse" (Marshall 1994: 420). The sceptical and pessimistic views grounded in postmodern thinking even seem to have been reinforced by the recent economic crisis and the negative consequences on people's living conditions it had or still has in many societies around the globe.

Figure 1: "For most people in country life is getting worse" - % Agree / strongly agree (2006)



Even though it was apparently premature to proclaim the "demise of the idea of progress" (Sztompka 1994: 33), it seems to be obvious that there is a need to rethink or eventually even redefine the meaning and notion of progress in the 21st century. An important line of scepticism is rooted in doubts and concerns about the sustainability of progress in its traditional notion, particularly in its understanding as a further advancement of the material level of living in rich as well as developing societies. According to Offe these sorts of concerns have turned the notion of progress into a 'logic of preventing regression', shifting the emphasis from 'moving ahead' to sustaining the achieved level of well-being and to prevent decline and regress, or in other words the metaphor of 'marching forward' is going to be replaced by "establishing effective stop signs" (Offe 2011: 86). As an alternative to such a de facto abandoning of the goal of achieving progress, which seems to be rather unlikely to be accepted by human mankind, it has been proposed to eventually re-conceptualize the idea of progress "in such a way that it captures all those elements which may have been neglected in the past: solidarity, sustainability, etc." (Kohl 2011: 4). Suggestions of this sort come close to proposing a concept of "net progress" (Offe 2011: 88f), which means gross-progress, net of negative side effects and externalities, and may thus also be understood as a tentative answer to the question of how to calculate "a balance of benefits and harms, functions and disfunctions" (Sztompka 1994: 29). However, as yet, the distinction between gross and net progress seems to be an option solely at the conceptual level and for heuristic purposes, rather than a feasible methodological approach, ready to be used for practical monitoring purposes and empirical research.

Measurement

Countless statistical measures of societal progress have been proposed over many years and decades. First suggestions of how to monitor progress empirically have been presented as

early as at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Bossard 1931/1932: 13). With his book "*Les indices numérique de la civilisation et du progress*" (1921) the Italian statistician and criminologist Alfredo Niceforo made an important early effort to systematically "identify quantifiable symptoms of living conditions in a broad sense - indicators in our modern terminology - in order to measure and monitor levels and degrees of civilisation and social progress across time and space" (Noll 2004: 152). In the retrospect, Niceforo thus may be considered as an important predecessor of the social indicators movement, which emerged in the 1960s and put the measurement of progress - in terms of living conditions and quality of life and societies - explicitly at the agenda at national and supranational levels. The character of social indicators as measures of progress is pretty well reflected in some of the early definitions. Raymond Bauer (1966: 1) defined social indicators as "statistics ...and other forms of evidence that enable us to assess where we stand and are going with respect to our values and goals". Mancur Olson (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1969: 97) considered a social indicator as "a statistic of direct normative interest which facilitates concise, comprehensive and balanced judgements about the condition of major aspects of a society. ...It is a direct measure of welfare and is subject to the interpretation that if it changes in the 'right' direction... things have gotten better, or people are 'better off'". Both definitions thus emphasize the function of social indicators to measure and monitor societal progress in the sense of improvements in well-being over time, or societal change relative to normative standards, such as values and goals. In subsequent years, research on social indicators has resulted in different sorts of measurement tools and instruments, indicators and indicator systems, composite indices as well as population surveys, with a view to empirically monitor progress continuously.

The ongoing activities of monitoring societal progress as part of social indicators research and social reporting activities have received new stimuli and momentum by a recently renewed interest in the measurement of well-being and progress "beyond GDP" among economists, official statistics and policy makers. This renewed interest and debate has been triggered off by initiatives like the "OECD - Global Project on Measuring the *Progress* of Societies" (Hall et al. 2010), the report of the so-called 'Stiglitz Commission' on the "Measurement of Economic Performance and *Social Progress*" (Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi 2010), but also the "beyond GDP" initiative of the European Commission (www.beyond-gdp.eu/) and diverse projects on measuring well-being and progress at the national level, e.g. in Australia and Ireland. Apart from few exceptions, theoretical and conceptual issues are however rarely reflected thoroughly within this new debate on the measurement of progress.

Since the concept of progress is multidimensional by nature, as it is the case with underlying concepts like well-being and quality of life, it seems to be obvious first of all, that measurement approaches, like e.g. indicator systems, suggest a multitude of measures to comprehensively cover the diverse dimensions and sub-dimensions deemed to be relevant. Actually, such an approach based on a multitude of single indicators, seems to be the only way to arrive at a detailed diagnosis, whether or not the various elements have been changing in the desired direction and to which degree goals and objectives have been achieved. Since the different domains and dimensions considered to be relevant, may change in an uneven or asynchronous way, a measurement approach based on a variety of single indicators may

however not necessarily lead to a clear cut and unequivocal overall assessment that things have gotten better or worse. Rather it turns out to be quite likely that changes in different domains and dimensions will not only taking place at different rates, but also go in different - more or less desirable - directions, e.g. increasing unemployment may go together with extended longevity, and raising household incomes may be accompanied by increasing crime rates. In other words: because 'uni-dimensional' change must not result in 'syndromatic' change (Novak 1990: 235f), there is a good chance that "progress in certain sectors of society does not add up to a comprehensive progress throughout the whole that earns the name of progress in the singular" (Joas 1990: 188).

Against this background there is thus a demand for measures allowing to balance the various developments in different domains and dimensions of life and to allow unidimensional measurement of a multidimensional concept or phenomenon. This demand is being addressed by constructing so-called 'composite indices' of progress. To our knowledge, Nicefero (1921) was also among the first scholars aiming to develop a composite index of progress, which he considered as an improvement of the total of living conditions across time. However, his efforts to develop such an index were not successful and he dismissed this idea with some disillusionment.

In recent years research aiming to develop composite indices of wellbeing and progress has been flourishing and there are plenty composite index measures available, which have been proposed as measures of progress. Among the most popular are the "Genuine Progress Index", the "Human Development Index", the "Happy-Planet-Index" and the "OECD-Better-Life-Index". Also at national level composite indices of progress have been proposed, such as the Canadian Index of Wellbeing or the Australian National Development Index (www.andi.org.au/), responding to the requirement to take national particularities into account. Although the composite index approaches mentioned differ in their conceptual foundations, aims, coverage in terms of domains and dimensions, and not least their underlying methodologies, they are all characterized by the ambitious objective of providing unidimensional quantitative measures for the multidimensional concept of societal progress. All of these measures have their particular strengths and weaknesses, also in methodological terms. However as yet, there is no general agreement of how a composite index of societal progress should look like, neither methodologically, nor in terms of which single domains and dimensions are to be included. Moreover it thus seems to be rather unlikely that there will be an undisputable and broadly accepted single measure of progress available in the near future. The current debate about the measurement of progress has nevertheless stimulated numerous promising research activities, which may hopefully lead to scholarly progress in the empirical monitoring of societal progress in the future.

Cross-References

- Better-Life-Index
- Canadian Index of Wellbeing
- Composite Index Construction
- Genuine Progress Index
- Happy-Planet-Index

- Human Development Index
- Indicator Systems
- Social Change
- Social Indicators

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