

Johano Strasser

“To Value Ends Above Means” How to Reconnect Progress With Human Needs

Vortrag auf der UNADOC-Konferenz 'The Notion of Progress in the Diversity of World Cultures' vom 30. Mai bis zum 2. Juni in New York

In 1928 the British economist John Maynard Keynes held a famous speech before the distinguished members of the *Political Economy Club* of Cambridge under the title *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* in which he offered a conditional prognosis: “assuming no important wars and no important increase in population” he declared it possible that in less than a hundred years the whole of mankind might live in comfortable economic conditions without having to work more than 15 hours a week.

Well, we all know that the precondition he made – no important wars, no important increase in population - was soon shattered by the course of history. Nevertheless, what Keynes had in mind was not pure nonsense. What he really aimed at was to remind his fellow economists and the public at large of what is, or should be, the ultimate purpose of all our economic endeavours.

“I see us free”, he said, “to return to some of the most sure and certain principles of religion and traditional virtue - that avarice is a vice, that the exaction of usury is a misdemeanour, and the love of money is detestable, that those walk most truly in the paths of virtue and sane wisdom who take least thought for the morrow. We shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin.”

Keynes was not a doddering old man given to sentimentality, he was no more than forty-five years old and in full possession of his critical faculties when he wrote these lines. Neither was he a fossilized conservative guided by ideal virtues and moral principles that no longer have any relevance for us today. He merely reminded us of the bright promise generated by the dawn of the modern movement for progress, a

promise that has sustained mankind to this day, in spite of centuries of conflict, tribulations and deprivations.

The contrast of Keynes' vision of 'the good life' with the realities of the modern economic world today could not possibly be greater. Today, the working majority are constantly admonished to work harder and longer, to accept lower pay while putting up with cuts in social welfare, to keep their head above water by job hopping and resign themselves to repeated periods of unemployment, while at the same time the environment around is plundered, inequality, already on a scandalous scale, increases continuously, and the destructive repercussions of massive speculation affect their everyday lives.

In today's business world avarice is regarded as a major virtue, the exaction of usury as economic expertise. To enjoy life, "to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well", as Keynes put it, is regarded as a horrifying sin. What is expected of everybody today is that they are permanently busy, be it in productive activity or in perfecting their employability. From the point of view of our economic elites, economic growth and technological progress are no longer a means to better the lot of mankind, to satisfy the needs of the people and make them lead a happier and more fulfilling life in an atmosphere of material and humane generosity.

As a matter of fact, what we still call progress today is, if we consider e.g. the damage done to the environment and the effort it would take to limit it, a highly unprofitable business. But most of the time we do not even draw a realistic balance of assets and drawbacks, but regard growth and technological progress as ultimate ends in themselves. For the majority of people progress has become a fateful and exacting power organised by a monetary elite with almost no contact at all with everyday life and the needs and aspirations of ordinary people.

If a cannibal learns to eat with knife and fork, would we call this progress? It was the Polish writer Stanislaw Jerzy Lec who posed this question. Of course, what he said is amusing, but it also reminds us that atrocities remain atrocities even if they are committed by civilized people in a civilized manner. We could likewise ask if it is progress if an American soldier no longer has to risk his life in house-to-house fighting somewhere in Afghanistan or Iraq, but instead, sitting safely in front of a screen in Arizona with a joystick in his hand, blows up a marriage party somewhere in Afghanistan, at which, according to intelligence

information, a leader of Al Quaida is present. Of course, from the point of view of the American soldier this is much better than risking his life, but from the perspective of all other human beings, especially the innocent men, women, and children who attend the marriage party, it is a barbaric regression.

I think we all agree at least that neither the case of the cannibal nor that of the American soldier are examples of what 'progress' meant when in the 17th and 18th century it became the keyword of modernity in Europe. The concept of progress from its early beginnings in the 17th century was envisaged as a continuous process of amelioration of the human condition in all its aspects and dimensions. Progress was defined as a process of civilization according to humanistic values, at once universal and infinite, i.e. as benefiting mankind as a whole and going on without any temporal limitation. We find this notion of progress with Francis Bacon and René Descartes in the 16th century, with the early thinkers of the enlightenment, such as Fontenelle in the 17th century, and with the majority of 18th century intellectuals. Most of them were extremely optimistic about the expected outcome of the historical development they promoted and probably would have agreed with Fontenelle's opinion, "that men will never degenerate and all the sound convictions of all sane spirits will for ever accumulate."

Even Adam Smith, who in 1776 published his famous *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, did not look upon his economic studies as belonging to the field of abstract and self-sufficient science, but regarded them as contributions to moral philosophy, which obviously meant that he viewed the economy as a means for the realization of superior human values. He would never have dreamt of conceding to the economy an autonomous power and legitimacy to which not only individuals, but also states, have to submit. But this is exactly what many economists hold to be perfectly justified today, citing Smith, quite incorrectly, as the progenitor of such a concept.

"To be ruled by a privileged society of merchants", Adam Smith wrote when dealing with the colonialism of his time, "is probably the worst government for any country". Smith was deeply convinced that to leave government to the merchant class would inevitably prevent progress in the full sense of the word. Quote: "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable." It was Smith's conviction that, wherever the economic elites

seize power, they tend to neglect the interests and aspirations of the majority of people. Quote: “It is the industry which is carried on for the benefit of the rich and the powerful, that is principally encouraged by our mercantile system. That which is carried on for the benefit of the poor and indigent, is too often, either neglected, or oppressed.”

How relevant these remarks are today we easily understand when we look at the way the big Western companies treat the working people in what formerly was called the *Third World*. In complicity with authoritarian or despotic regimes who deny people the right to freely express their opinions and to pursue their own interests these companies exploit working people cynically and mercilessly, pay wages no person can subsist on, violate the most elementary rules of occupational health and safety and environmental integrity, and try to forestall every attempt of working men and women to organize themselves in trade unions.

Contrary to the small group of people who control the global financial system and who regard themselves as the organizers of progress today, Adam Smith did not, as is often fallaciously claimed, propagate a completely free and self-regulating market, nor did he think of man in terms of *homo oeconomicus*, that unrealistic and cynical concept of man underlying today’s leading economic theory. Economic reductionism, i.e. the interpretation of all human impulses and ambitions as economic calculations according to the theory of rational choice, was as alien to his thinking as the materialistic reductionism of his contemporaries Diderot, Helvétius and Holbach. His vision of man, and consequently also his concept of progress, was unequivocally humanistic.

The same, by the way, is true of the *pursuit of happiness*, which the founding fathers of the United States of America laid down as a fundamental right of all free men in the *Declaration of Independence*. As with most philosophers of the Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and others were of the opinion that there was a link between education in its most all-embracing, humanistic sense and a fulfilled and happy life. Education was for them the essential prerequisite for personal development and for political involvement, it was a guarantor of peace, and it also ensured economic success; all four aspects were regarded as a reliable basis for a happy life, not economic success alone.

In the first three to four decades after World War II there seemed to be a consensus in the West that a market economy needed a strong

framework of rules and laws in order to function for the benefit of the people. But in the early eighties, and even more so after the breakdown of the Soviet bloc, a new radical belief in free and unregulated markets captured the minds of economists and politicians. Mechanisms that were designed to protect the weak in society from the overbearing power of the strong, to protect the environment and our cultural heritage from the unintentional destructive effects of production and consumption, and the whole multi-faceted infrastructure of public institutions and publicly owned assets were suspected of shackling the initiative of business enterprise and restricting the growth of industry.

Today we have a global economy in which a few large concerns and financial services companies, together with the ruling elites of rich and powerful states, some of them despotic regimes, determine to a very large extent the course of progress, with virtually no democratic checks and balances. They determine who receives what proportion of the communally earned wealth, who can afford to eat and who goes hungry. Never in the history of mankind were the world's assets so unfairly distributed, nor has there ever before been a time when a financial elite has enjoyed such absolute power – in the words of Pope Francis - such an “economic dictatorship without a face and devoid of any real human objective”. The verdict of the Pope “This economy kills” leaves no doubt that he is in favour of a complete change in the thrust and direction of economic policy. His aims are absolutely in accord with those that Keynes had in mind, namely that ends should be valued higher than means.

Many economists and politicians seem to be mesmerised by the belief that the “unseen hand” of the market and a financial system guided by the dictates of anonymous algorithms can remove from our shoulders the responsibility for the world and the well-being or woe of its inhabitants. At least that is what they pretend to believe in and what they tell the people. May be that, what they really believe in, is that normal people should not interfere with such complicated questions as the economic, technological, and social development, that democracy is an old-fashioned idea in a globalized world, that important matters should be handled by a small group of rich and powerful financial and economic leaders.

Not until we succeed in overcoming the still widespread illusion that free markets or a small group of privileged specialists can deliver us from the

burden of responsibility we will be able to build a better and more humane world. Only if scientific and technical progress and economic growth are no longer looked upon as ends in themselves by a privileged minority and accepted as an inalterable fate by the majority of mankind can we begin to contemplate what has to be done to shape progress in accordance with human needs and direct it toward humanistic ends.

In order to reconnect the process of progress with the needs of humankind, it is essential to initiate a public debate about the legitimate aims of progress and how effective democratic political control can be administered in order to reach these aims. This is what the international community, what the United Nations Organisation and its various organs, what some democratic governments and many NGO's attempt to do. But the power and the financial means of all these organisations are limited. The minimal standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) are not recognised in some of the most powerful and rich countries, agreements to protect the environment and to prevent excessive global warming are disregarded by some of the worst polluters, and attempts to prevent the proliferation of atomic weapons will probably not be successful in the long run, as long as the leading atomic powers fail to disarm. It is the egotism of the rich and powerful that ruins the world.

Real progress in a globalized world is impossible as long as it is easy for the most powerful global players to exempt themselves from rules and aims agreed upon by the vast majority of mankind. One of the greatest problems is that economic global players can act freely and capital can be transferred, invested and administered on a global scale, while political institutions on the national and regional level and those representing the majority of the world population such as the United Nations are restricted in their ability to act. Progress as a process based on human values can only become a reality when we succeed in introducing enforceable and binding regulations for the global markets and when all global players accept a framework of legislation incorporating those minimum standards in social welfare and environmental protection laid down by the UN.

In this respect it is alarming to note recent attempts to pre-empt measures intended to make the world economy more accountable to democratic institutions. One example is the recent attempt by US and European companies together with the European Commission and the

US Administration to create a sphere of activity for leading players in the global economy with its own rules and regulations by means of so-called free trade agreements, such as the highly controversial TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) and TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). Let me stress only one aspect of these treaties which is alarming for all who still believe in democracy. If the private courts of arbitration as designated in the draft of these treaties were established this would, in effect, mean that by far the largest economic trade area in the world, would become, in many crucial aspects, a sphere ruled exclusively by powerful private interests. It would no longer be subject to national or international law enforced by legitimate jurisdiction. This in turn would entail the denial of both judicial accountability and the administration of justice to nearly a billion people. The affected populations and their elected representatives would no longer have democratic or legal avenues open to them to object or protest against the arbitrary acts of powerful private interests.

No wonder that the architects of these treaties try to prevent any parliamentary discussion about the content of the the treaties. In America the members of both houses of Congress are denied concrete information about what the treaties are about, in Europe the members of the European Parliament as well as those of the national parliaments are likewise denied substantial information. What Senator Bernhard Sanders wrote in a letter addressed to Michael Froman, the United States Trade Representative, expresses exactly what many members of parliament in Europe feel. Quote: "It is incomprehensible to me that the leaders of major corporate interests who stand to gain enormous financial benefits from this agreement are actively involved in the writing of the TPP while, at the same time, the elected officials of this country, representing the American people, have little or no knowledge as to what is in it."

The decoupling scientific, technical and economic progress from every form of control and oversight by official regulatory bodies committed to upholding generally established and accepted values opens the door to highly questionable developments. We are already experiencing in the field of Big Data an impenetrable concentration of private sector power and an abuse of dominance which makes behaviour modification and the manipulation of its users through the despotic use of its resources possible on a scale that has never before been achieved in the history of mankind. The collecting of personal data to create personal profiles, the so-called *digital twins*, by companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon, is the basis for billion-dollar businesses, which, so far, have all managed to avoid democratic controls. At the same time their

surveillance activities are the most serious intrusion into the basic right to privacy of the individual and provide a platform for a possible totalitarian control of the population that has never existed before in such a comprehensive and radical form.

Possibly one of the most dangerous extravagances is the modern belief in the potential offered by artificial intelligence, the idea that computers will one day be endowed with all the functions of the human brain. For the sake of brevity I cannot go into the discussion about AI in detail. I am optimistic enough to make the assertion that it will not be possible to create an artificial intelligence that can equal human intelligence in its distinctive attributes. What the so-called 'intelligent' machines will always lack, is the specifically human ability to give reasons for their actions, to give a moral justification for their aims, for the doubts that accompany their decisions, for the considerations that can lead them to make a radical break with the past, for the awareness of responsibilities and for feeling guilty, in short: these machines will always lack freedom.

The problem we have with the development of artificial intelligence is basically not anthropological, and certainly not religious; it is first and foremost political, i.e. a question of power. If social interrelationships and social fora are organised primarily within cyber-structures created by artificial intelligence, there will be no barriers to manipulation. That is why the European Court gave a ruling in May 2014 that the Google company had to respect the right of every citizen to control his personal data and his or her right to be forgotten, i.e. to insist on the permanent erasure of sensitive data. The court was of the opinion that personal data are an integral part of an individual's subjective human persona and should not be treated as a freely exploitable resource for a new digital industry. Quote: "When human beings as data subjects are not allowed the right to control their personal data, they are open to subjection."

I have to be short. Let me, therefore, end with a rather general statement: This conference is debating the notion of progress in the context of the great and inspiring diversity of world cultures. It may seem to some that my intervention so far was a bit too eurocentric. Of course, the concept of progress itself is, historically speaking, distinctly European. But like the notion of fundamental human rights, which also bears the marks of European heritage, it is not an idea that is relevant only in the context of the specific European or Western culture and way of life. I am convinced that the Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 together with the two

Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, passed by the UN in 1966 and 1976 respectively, are of universal relevance and should be guidelines for all our attempts to further progress. What we urgently need today is a broad and open discussion about the next steps to be taken in order to better the lot of mankind and about the instruments with which the peoples of the world can determine the course of future progress according to their needs and aspirations. We should no longer leave the most important questions relating to the future of mankind to either anonymous market forces or to a handful of powerful global players.