

1. From the point of view of your chosen academic approach, is it meaningful to speak of human progress through the ages? Is there a useful distinction to be made regarding technological, cultural and moral progress?

Progress is generally regarded as moving forward in a positive direction. In his essay *The Idea of Progress*, sociologist Robert Nisbet (1979, p.7) states that the essence of the Western idea of progress is as follows: “mankind has advanced in the past, is now advancing, and may be expected to continue advancing in the future.” This statement captures the elusive nature of the notion of progress. It ultimately raises the question of what it means to advance, and how this can be measured. The term “progress” can be applied to many facets of humankind’s expansive existence. Technology, economy, culture, language, religion, and morality are all examples of the numerous factors to consider when discussing human progress. It also raises another conundrum: how can we interpret the notion of progress when certain factors are in conflict with one another? There are numerous ways to approach this question, however, this discussion explores the notion of progress, and how it wrestles with the tension between economic development and environmental preservation within the context of mining in the Amazon rainforest. The Yanomami provide a case study with which to compare indigenous and non-indigenous ideas of progress. It is ultimately argued that progress is too restrictive a concept with which to measure the nuanced nature of human advancement. What is progress for one group can be destruction for another. Furthermore, indigenous views on progress challenge western ideologies, highlighting how views on progress can be conflicting. It may be more meaningful to reframe

progress with a focus on balance, sustainability, equality, cultural and environmental preservation, and social well-being.

The Yanomami, sometimes referred to as the Yānomamö or Yanomama, are an indigenous tribe that live in the Amazon rainforest, on the border between Brazil and Venezuela. With a population of around 35,000, they are the largest relatively isolated tribe in South America (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2024, p.2). They live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and have adapted to their environment and developed a system for sustainable living in the forest over hundreds of years (Rocha, 1999, p.33). They have been the subject of ethnographic research for a number of decades, with anthropologists such as Napoleon Chagnon and Bruce Albert contributing to our current understanding of their culture. The Yanomami have sparked ongoing debates pertaining to the issue of illegal mining and its cultural, environmental, and social impact. This is a very contemporary issue in anthropological discourse, with scholars referring to the increasingly devastating impact of gold mining as a “humanitarian crisis” (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2024; McCullough, 2024).

The current issue of gold mining on Yanomami land can be traced back to the 1970s. The Yanomami’s first significant contact with outsiders occurred in 1973, when a road was built through their territory, and by the mid 1970s garimpeiros (gold miners) began invading the area (1999, p.36). More than a million wildcat prospectors flocked to the Amazon during the 1980s gold rush (Rocha, 1999, p.47). The incentive was financial gain, with the price of an ounce of gold rising on the international market from \$150 at the beginning of the 1970s to \$900 by 1980 (1999, p.47). The majority of prospectors

came from impoverished rural areas in which there was no electricity, running water, nor a sewage system (1999, p.50). For them, the gold rush represented job prospects, financial gain, and the possibility of an improved quality of life. Despite this allure, it is estimated that only 1% to 2.5% of those involved in gold mining accumulated over 5kg of gold (1999, p.51). In other words, the overwhelming majority were sold a false promise and did not obtain wealth. Furthermore, it is believed presently that a number of garimpeiros are being forced to work in the garimpos (gold mines). A study conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) discovered that as many as 40% of miners in Brazil may be victims of human trafficking. This illustrates how the ones benefiting from gold mining are seldom the ones doing the hard work- the garimpeiros themselves. The exploitation of workers in the garimpos raises ethical questions, which suggests it may be relevant to consider morality and ethics within a discussion on human progress.

The practice of gold mining has produced tensions between the Yanomami and the garimpeiros, which are believed to be exacerbated by cultural misunderstandings. One such example of this pertains to reciprocity. When the garimpeiros first arrived on Yanomami land, they were small in numbers and consequently vulnerable to the tribe. They gifted them with goods and food as a way of earning their approval (Rocha, 1999, p.56). As the numbers of garimpeiros grew, they felt this act of goodwill was unnecessary, and stopped distributing goods to the Yanomami. This coincided with deteriorating health amongst the Yanomami due to illness brought by the garimpeiros, and malnutrition as the miners polluted the rivers and drove away local mammals which

compose their diet. By the time the Yanomami began to feel they were owed compensation for the destructive impact of mining, the garimpeiros began to feel entitled and in control of the territory. This cultural misunderstanding highlights conflicting views on progress, and how what is beneficial for one group is not necessarily good for another.

Mining and politics became intertwined in 1985 when Brazil became a constitutional democracy following two decades of military rule (Rocha, 1999, p.59). Due to the extortionate number of garimpeiros, which equated to votes, the right to mine on indigenous land became a central cause for politicians in Roraima, a town at the center of the gold rush (p.60). Mineral resources, including gold, were seen as common property, which seemed to legitimize the illegal act of mining on indigenous land from a moral viewpoint (1999, p.60). Defending the right to mine was conflated with a commitment to development and progress, whereas opposition to mining was seen as a threat to progress (1999, p.60). If, however, the goal of progress is environmental preservation, then mining would not be representative of progress. This again illustrates how views on progress can be conflicting, and why it is important to distinguish between different forms of progress.

Since the gold rush in the 1980's, destruction of the forest has not ceased, resulting in a number of problems for its inhabitants. Urban infrastructure, agriculture, mining, and forestry has resulted in deforesting 10% of the Amazon rainforest (Lima and Fidalgo, 2023, p.459). This equates to a total of 72 million lost hectares. Mining is the most

significant factor attributed to this loss, as this practice has resulted in a 766% increase in forest destruction since 1985 (2023, p.459). Deforestation is not the only destructive impact of the garimpeiros' presence on Yanomami land. Additional issues include increased rates of malaria and other health issues, food shortages and child malnutrition, conflict and violence, and sexual violence towards women and children (2023, p.459). Furthermore, these compounding issues have resulted in deteriorating mental well-being among the Yanomami, culminating in an increase in rates of suicide and substance abuse. Suicide has become a recent epidemic among indigenous people, to which young people are particularly vulnerable. The suicide mortality rate is 18 times higher for indigenous children than for non-indigenous children (2023, p.459). One significant factor which contributes to this shocking statistic is that traditional values typically transmitted from generation to generation are not being adopted by indigenous youths (2023, p.459). It is believed that these values are a significant protector against suicide among indigenous people. Substance abuse issues among indigenous people are believed to be a result of biological, psychological, historical, social, and cultural factors (2023, p.459). This demonstrates how mining has introduced numerous serious problems for the Yanomami and resulted in deteriorating social progress.

The dual issue of substance abuse and mental health difficulties occur in other indigenous communities. For example, evidence shows that indigenous Australians are more likely than non-indigenous Australians to struggle with substance abuse and mental health disorders (Berry and Crowe, 2009, p.2-3). This suggests a causal link between colonialism, industrialisation, and modernisation, and the deteriorating

well-being of indigenous groups. This presents a conflict between different forms of progress. Those who benefit from colonialism and industrialisation would likely justify it as human progress, but it is relevant to also consider moral progress and the impact it has on those to whom it is a detriment.

Despite the detrimental impact on the collective well-being of the Yanomami, they are far from meek and passive victims. The challenges they have faced have produced a response from Yanomami leaders. Davi Kopenawa is a shaman who speaks out against the struggles of his people and the destruction of his land. He published a first-person account in 2010 entitled *The Falling Sky*, alongside French anthropologist Bruce Albert, to tell his story and send a message to outsiders. The book's title refers to a Yanomami belief, in which the sky fell at the beginning of time (Kopenawa and Albert, 2013, p.131). It is believed that if all the shamans were to die, the sky would once again fall, and humanity would perish. He warns that the white people will “perish in their turn, crushed by the falling sky” (2013, p.406). It is believed that the shamans keep the forest and the sky in place, and so if they were all to die, “the sky will break apart for good, and no one will be able to do anything about it” (2013, p.407). Kopenawa’s warning foretells that the impact of gold mining, despite its contribution to the world's economy, may be considerably more destructive than we realise.

The value of money may be considered by many to be a universal absolute, but this is not always the case. Capitalism has become the dominant economic system globally (Sachs, 1999, p.90). Consequently, money is the prime incentive of mining, and the

mining industry is considered essential to the development of worldwide economies (Zhou, Liu and Niu, 2024, p.1). For the Yanomami, however, money is not a valuable asset. Kopenawa (2013, p.151) explains how Yanomami shamans do not work for money as Western doctors do. Rather, they work to maintain harmony, so that the forest and the sky remain in place. He explains that “money does not protect us, it does not fill our stomachs, it does not create our joy. For white people, it is different”. Although economic development may be considered a universal measure of human progress, this view is not shared by everyone.

When determining the benefits of economic development, it is perhaps significant to consider them in relation to other factors, such as environmental impact. Economist Kate Raworth (2018)

states that progress, as defined as meeting the needs of all people, cannot be measured by the metric of money. She argues that a healthy economy should place emphasis on thriving, rather than growth, and that our collective use of resources should not disrupt ecological balance. An ever-rising trajectory of growth is not sustainable, whereas adopting a cyclic system of economy may be more beneficial for humanity. She states that “when something tries to grow forever within a healthy, living, thriving system, it’s a threat to the health of the whole”. This statement parallels the Yanomami belief that continued destruction of their land will result in the ill fate of all of humanity. Kopenawa, quoted by Rocha (1999, p.41), speaks of progress during an interview with a Brazilian TV station. He states that “it is not that the Yanomami do not want progress ... they want to be able to choose, and not have change thrust upon

them". He goes on to say that they "want progress without destruction", and proposes a definition of progress which emphasises shared learning and cultivation, rather than a definition which is rooted in money. Here he outlines a clear alternative perspective of progress, and highlights the importance of freedom of choice. The Yanomami, and indeed everyone, surely have a right to progress in a way which is authentic to themselves, and not imposed by outside forces.

Perhaps progress, within the context of mining in the Amazon, could be defined not by maximising profits and economic growth, but by finding balance that considers the needs of all. Zhou, Liu, and Niu (2024, p.2) emphasise the importance of finding a balance between economic, environmental, and social goals. Advanced technology could enable methods of sustainable mining, however, this solution is made difficult due to the high cost of adopting such procedures (2024, p.2). Since the main incentive of mining is financial gain, it is typically seen as preferable to conduct it in the most cost effective manner. Therefore, a shift in goals and values could offer a more sustainable approach to mining. The lack of defined legislation and guidelines for sustainable mining also makes it difficult for businesses to incorporate more sustainable methods, and exacerbates ethical issues such as forced labour and poor working conditions (2024, p.2). They suggest that governments should require mining companies to assess environmental impact, and implement mitigation measures (2024, p.15). Furthermore, they propose that governments should create laws and initiatives to address human rights violations. They state that "accountability and transparency are crucial for advancing sustainable development in the mining industry" (2024, p.15), thus

emphasising how a perspective of progress which considers the overall impact of mining may be a more advantageous and sustainable way forward.

Progress is often viewed as moving forward in an upward trajectory, especially within the context of economic development. However, a circular view of progress which emphasises balance and sustainability may be more beneficial to humankind. Western economic systems could perhaps take inspiration from the Yanomami's developed system of sustainability. Illegal gold mining on Yanomami land is a significant contemporary issue which dates back to the 1970s, and has negatively impacted the Yanomami for decades since. Monetary gain is the incentive which drives this practice, and it is seen by many as a positive and valuable practice which provides jobs and the promise of financial gain. However, the benefits of mining are seldom seen by those doing the hard work. Mining on Yanomami land has been a destructive force, affecting their environment, their livelihood, and their individual and social well-being. Although economic development is widely considered to be a measure of human progress, it is relevant to question whether this is an accurate measure when its impact causes environmental destruction and deterioration of mental well-being. This illustrates why it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of progress such as economic, technological, moral, and cultural. Consequently, it may not be meaningful to place notions of progress on a pedestal, but rather, to discuss the advancement of humankind from a nuanced perspective which focuses on the needs and wellbeing of all people.

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