

(Ava) Clark

Economic Anthropology

Andy Bevan

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From the point of view of economic anthropology, 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?

INTRODUCTION

Thinking on human progress through the ages, especially when taking an anthropological approach, requires a certain degree of reflexivity and a critical recognition on the significance of cultural relativism, as well as the difficulties that arise when looking at history through an increasingly anthropocentric lens during the Anthropocene. In a time when it is becoming nearly impossible to ignore the damage humans have caused to the global ecology and the damage being done in return, where do we separate human progress from progress in general? We don't. Human beings are intrinsically interwoven and interconnected with the matter of the world around us, human or non-human; in this way, we interact with, affect, and are affected by the matter around us because we are part of it (Barad 2003, 2007, Bennett 2010). The only perceived separation is one carefully constructed by human beings in order to maintain and perpetuate ideals on human exceptionalism. However, this demands a slightly alternative approach to political economy, in which it can be understood more so as a form of interaction and connection with and between matter in which value and cultural significance is attributed to various materials (Morton 2016). In this essay, I will be exploring progress from an economic anthropological perspective in an effort to argue that while it is meaningful to critically discuss human progress and to carefully distinguish between the various aspects of said topic, the term progress itself is not necessarily one I would confidently associate with our world's history. In fact, I would largely credit the significance of exploring progress to the potential recognition that while the believed inevitability of human progress may be a myth, and investigating progress allows for a deeper dive into the how and why of our current place in history, matter and material

bodies directly, and indirectly, cause and influence change, and because change is immanent, it creates an endless pool of potential for actively contributing to what could be considered progress and positive change for the future.

PROGRESS: FACT OR MYTH?

Before addressing whether speaking on progress can be beneficial, the concept of human progress through history as a whole needs to be questioned – an undertaking that has already been explicated by various academics. Jared Diamond (1987) takes a rather cynical approach in his effort to thoroughly disprove the belief that “human history over the past million years has been a long tale of progress,” illustrating how the adoption of agriculture essentially opened the gate for mass inequality, despotism, disease, creating the society we live in today where everyone except the elite is significantly worse off (Diamond 1987, 64). This line of thought is still pursued today by academics like Morton (2015, 2016), and is often supported by works from both Marx and Engels that focus on the family economic unit as well as the associated increased sexual inequality and the subsequent exploitation of women (Diamond 1987, Engels 1884, Morton 2016). Unlike Diamond, however, Morton (2016) places this argument into the context of the current ecological crisis during the Anthropocene and highlights climate change as being a symptom of massively accelerated agriculture and capitalism. As modes of production and consumption have shifted with the rise of globalization and new technologies, the prospect of progress has become even more convoluted. Just over the last century, buying things from all over the world has never been easier, unions have helped to secure some workers’ rights and safeties, music and art have become more accessible, and yet the wage gap continues to grow exponentially in countries like the United States, homelessness and unemployment run rampant during a global pandemic in which access to healthcare is a luxury, and indigenous communities are still being pushed to the side because they reside on land that corporations see as an opportunity to make profit. Naturally, current conditions may have academics looking to a pre-agricultural past as a potential example of more equal, ‘simpler’ times. But we cannot reverse time, so where do we go from here?

More recently, academics like Graeber and Wengrow (2018, 2021) have attempted to rewrite the narrative once more, insisting that a “conceptual shift” is required in how we perceive human history because most of it is “irreparably lost to us,” and that the narrative of progress creates a “fundamental problem” by “[defining] our sense of political possibility” with “tragic necessities” based on myths about how humans lived before the widespread adoption of agriculture (David & Wengrow 2021, David & Wengrow 2018, 1). They critique Diamond’s work specifically when developing this position, pointing out various grand statements made about human history that do not necessarily match historical evidence any longer, and critique the conclusions that many similar academics have made in which there is essentially nothing to be done about the state of current inequality, outside of something catastrophic occurring.

So is it meaningful to speak on progress? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. A significant part of the issue lies in the term progress itself being used to overlay a false narrative of human history. Because people in the West are largely socialized to take the progress narrative as common knowledge, the topic of progress through the ages needs to be spoken on in order to effectively recognize that it is a myth, that there is an issue with how we perceive human history. From an economic anthropology standpoint, what do we mean exactly when we speak on progress through the ages? What exactly could be considered progress? The question itself seems entirely too subjective in my opinion for progress to be assumed as a constant theme throughout history. In this case, I would characterize progress as being synonymous with positive change, and Diamond’s (1987) argument as following a pattern of negative change post-agriculture, primarily with the development of mass inequality. I find myself dissatisfied with both narratives, one ill-founded and the other hopelessly depressing, and cannot help but agree with Graeber and Wengrow (2018), that the problem is fundamental in how we approach our history and our present situation.

Looking into the far past, Graeber and Wengrow (2018, 2021) mention that early homo sapiens “were our intellectual peers,” and determine that “most were probably more conscious of society’s potential than people generally are today, switching back and forth between different forms of organization every year,” essentially giving way to an “institutional flexibility” that allows for “the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given social structure and reflect;

to both make and unmake the political worlds we live in” (Graeber & Wengrow 2018, 13-14). This large-scale habit of reflexivity could prove to be rather significant if aspects of it were adopted today, since we seem to have, according to Graeber and Wengrow, become “stuck” (Graeber & Wengrow 2018, 14). We seem to be stuck hoping for progress and yet not really expecting to see any serious positive change, accepting that it just is what it is. Perhaps speaking on progress, or the lack thereof, through the ages is meaningful because it encourages a consideration of the potential for positive change and progress in the future. Graeber and Wengrow (2018) note, in a statement that comes strikingly close to theories in New Materialities, that “there seems to be a growing recognition, in revolutionary circles, that freedom, tradition, and the imagination have always, and will always be entangled, in ways we do not completely understand” (Graeber & Wengrow 2018, 9). It is these realizations that will help to fundamentally shift the approach we take in understanding how matter, living and non-living, human and nonhuman, interconnect with and change each other – now and throughout our history.

CHANGE AND ‘PROGRESS’ THROUGH THE AGES

There are useful distinctions to be made between various aspects of what could be considered ‘progress,’ particularly because it helps to develop an effective understanding of how change, for better or worse, interconnects with different facets of history.

Technology, for one, is especially difficult to address due to its mass acceleration over the past few decades. In fact, it is probably one of the few facets of change, or progress, in which we can physically see the differences in everyday life even over the past five years. Tech corporations like Apple, for example, come out with a ‘new and improved’ phone every year or two, contributing to an accelerated consumerist culture. It’s never been easier to buy things, just a click on your phone and it can be delivered to your door, overnight even. On the other hand, political theorist William Connolly (2010) discusses how improved technologies have been systematically utilized by governments such as the United States, allowing for rather dystopian realizations on the reality of living in a surveillance state. Between consumerist culture cementing class divisions and social media ensuring the easy rise of tracking and propaganda,

technology has had an extremely significant impact on society, even ingraining itself so fully over last twenty years in everyday life that it has become largely unusual for someone to not have some sort of device on them at all times.

It is not difficult to recognize, then, how technology has interacted with and become part of the culture, so much so that it is now often a mode of production for contemporary culture. Thoughts on progress seem to be increasingly paradoxical and subjective when addressing the details and distinctions that can be made within the various facets of progress itself. This is made abundantly clear when discussing cultural and moral change over time. Who is to say what is considered cultural or moral progress? There is no one human culture; culture is everywhere and constantly shifting and changing to match the world and the people around it. This is exactly why intersectionality and cultural relativism is significant to take into account here, because there is no one version of what progress looks like. Questions on morality bring into play subjective human concepts such as good and evil, which Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point out to be entirely nonsensical characteristics of judgement when looking at the notion of progress, not to mention the religious undertones that fuel many arguments on morality as a subject. Historian Theodore Christou (2008) concedes that of course humans can make “moral advances,” of course we can “leap and fly,” but “we also fall,” “we alternate between periods of light and periods of darkness,” and though this is a rather poetic outlook, it underpins that while progress is not a given, change is (Christou 2008, 190). Whether someone is looking into the past to support the notion of progress or searching for more reasons to prove it a myth, or perhaps even to highlight why neither argument is useful, studying the many distinct aspects of change throughout history will prove crucial in the effort to clearly see and discuss the big picture.

CONCLUSION

Altogether, I would say that yes, it is meaningful to speak on progress and yes, there is a useful distinction to be made between technological, cultural, and moral progress. However, I hope that I have done an effective job of showing that the reasoning behind these answers is not so straightforward. Progress through the ages is meaningful to speak on because the widely accepted notion of human progress needs to be deconstructed, and in doing so, may help to

produce an unobstructed version of history that better understands how deeply matter, humans, and the world we are part of blend together.

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