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CRITICAL THEORY IN REGRESSIVE TIMES: LIBERALISM, GLOBAL POPULISM AND THE “WHITE LEFT” IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*

Abstract

In this paper, I consider not only the crisis in conservative neoliberalism and free market economics, but a crisis of representation and plausibility in progressive new liberalism; a situation which leads to deadlock for progressivism in which things *cannot* progress. In order to address this state of crisis in the global perception of the “white left,” Critical Theory, as a mode of Western liberal thought, needs to rethink the direction of its own criticism. Additionally, Critical Theory needs to adjust its focus to respond to the deadlock presented by the rise of right-wing populism and the derogation of liberal values in these regressive times (I refer antonymically, here, to Jürgen Habermas’s use of the term “progressive”). The radical democratic ideal advocated by Habermas, comprising universal equality and emancipation, should still be the goal for liberalism, and for Critical Theory, but first of all, the achievements and advances liberal progressivism has already made need to be secured to prevent society from regressing. This does not mean making a choice between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, but that a new paradigm of thinking is due. I argue that universality is anterior to cultural pluralism, as are social topics to cultural issues, and justice of distribution to justice of identity. In the complex world of modernity, good things do not come together if there is conflict between desirable values, so choices need to be made: a ranking of real, material conditions is necessary, to ensure cohesion and progression.

Keywords

Critical Theory, social progress, regression, liberal left, populism, Habermas

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1.

Heinrich Geiselberger, writing in 2017, declares that we are now living in the era of “the great regression” (“die große Regression”) and he suggests that the world is “witnessing a reversion to an earlier stage of ‘civilized conduct.’”¹ As the world sees the global return of authoritarianism and the rise of right-wing populism, the growing dominance of right-wing politics challenges the basic tenets of modernity and progressive processes that had been ongoing since the end of the Second World War.

Jürgen Habermas argues that the moral-practical self-understanding of modernity as a whole concerns the best polity, and the self-understanding attached to universalist moral consciousness and to the liberal design of the constitutional state.² For the duration of his career thus far, Habermas has sought to improve this normative understanding of democratic constitutional state and to envision the best practical way of realizing it. In this sense, we can say that Habermas’s theory is a progressive reconstruction of modernity. His philosophy is not only a counterpart to the great intellectual achievement of the democratization of Germany after the Second World War, but it may also be viewed as a main spiritual resource of this process.

Importantly, Habermas is appreciated by intellectuals around the world, including in the countries of Eastern Asia and China. It has been more than thirty years since I began reading and studying Habermas’s work. In this time, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have been translated and published in China and have had a great impact in Philosophy and the Social Sciences, where arguably the most influential thinker among the School’s associates is Habermas. His visit to China in April 2001 caused a major stir: the audience was so large that the venue had to be changed repeatedly, and the talk eventually took place in an auditorium that held thousands of people. The visit is considered to be one of the most important academic events in China after Bertrand Russell’s and John Dewey’s visits to the country in 1919. In Chinese academia, Rawls and Habermas are recognized as the greatest democratic theorists of the past thirty years. However, the social and political atmosphere here is beginning to change. Many people are now questioning the efficacy of the Western mode of democracy, and its associated theoretical discourses. Cynicism is directed not only at Habermas and the Frankfurt School, but toward the entire tradition of liberal democracy in the West as a whole. A phenomenon resulting from this is that people who hold liberal democratic values are deemed “white left,” a term (discussed below) that expresses profound contempt.

¹ Heinrich Geiselberger, “The Great Regression: Preface of the editor,” in: *The Great Regression: An International Debate* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), <http://www.thegreatregression.eu/preface-of-the-editor/#fn4> (accessed: October 28, 2019).

² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, translated by William Rehg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996), xli.

“Baizuo” is a neologism created by China’s netizens. Literally “white left” in mandarin, “baizuo” refers to liberal elites, predominantly those in the West. One Chinese scholar who interviewed adopters of the term explains its meaning and connotations:

Although the emphasis varies, baizuo is used generally to describe those who “only care about topics such as immigration, minorities, LGBT and the environment” and “have no sense of real problems in the real world;” they are hypocritical humanitarians who advocate for peace and equality only to “satisfy their own feeling of moral superiority”; they are “obsessed with political correctness” to the extent that they “tolerate backwards Islamic values for the sake of multiculturalism;” they believe in the welfare state that “benefits only the idle and the free riders;” they are the “ignorant and arrogant westerners” who “pity the rest of the world and think they are saviors.”³

According to the term’s users, baizuo is the main source of chaos and conflict in the Western world today. For example, these netizens believe that simply to quell the white left’s conscience, European countries have accepted large numbers of Islamic refugees, which has led to terrorist incidents, as well as financial burdens, in these countries. In these netizens’ views, the political correctness preached by baizuo clouds their morality and values. In short, baizuo (白左) is idiot (baichi, 白痴), a naïve, simple, and narrow-minded liberalist.

It is important to note that “white left” does not only refer to Western white people, but to all people who believe in political liberalism, cultural pluralism, moral universalism, the welfare state, cosmopolitanism, ecologism, feminism and gender politics. So, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and even the liberal Chinese intellectual elite are all considered to be baizuo. In politics, many people who claim to be opponents of the white left are also supporters of Donald Trump.

The term is now not only used by China’s netizens, but has spread to the West and elsewhere, and is now even included in the Urban Dictionary.⁴ In 2017, Fox News devoted a program to it; even in Germany the word attracts public attention, and some conservatives agree with its criticism of the white left. The emergence of the term, baizuo, and its spread in the West, signal the global rise of right-wing populism.

In my view, the current crisis is not just a crisis of conservative neoliberalism and the free market, but also a crisis of progressive new liberalism. Some people directly claim the white left is a regressive left, because the program of liberal left did not improve our society, rather than causes chaos and conflicts in politics. We live in a complex and difficult situation, the prospect of progress is fading, but the retrogression is becoming more and more obvious. If we concede the normative ideal of the Critical Theory is liberal leftism, the challenge the liberal left faces is also challenge the Critical Theory has to face.

³ Zhang, “The Curious Rise.”

⁴ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=baizuo> (accessed: October 29, 2019).

2.

The world in 2019 finds itself in a situation similar to that which Karl Polanyi described in the 1930s: “Nineteenth-century civilization has collapsed.”⁵ In the interwar period, he described how:

Democracy and Capitalism, i.e., the existing political and economic system, have reached a deadlock, because they have become the instruments of two different classes of opposing interests. [...] Fascism resolves it at the cost of a moral and material retrogression.⁶

Today, I argue, we face the same deadlock. The neoliberal world order, and its globalization project, is in a state of collapse; what follows is the rise of the authoritarianism across the world.

What is the origin of this situation? Neoliberalism is often considered a conspiracy of the neoclassical economists of Chicago University, while, actually, New Left criticism and new social movements are major promoters of neoliberalism. Since the 1960s, progressive liberals and new social movements have criticized many aspects of the welfare states of advanced Western societies as simply a different and less directly exploitative form of capitalism. Even though this new form of capitalism alleviated some of the effects of class inequality and the conflict of distribution in liberal capitalism, the rationalized organizational form of industrial production and the omnipresent invasion of state power into lifeworld nevertheless caused serious alienation and dehumanization. To some extent, the progressives’ criticism has damaged the legitimacy of the post-war liberal, democratic, and welfare state system. Unlike social critiques of traditional socialism, new left and liberal democrats developed a new style of critique, namely cultural critique or aesthetic critique. The critique focused on the side-effects of homogenization and alienation brought about by the welfare state, rather than the domination of the traditional inequality of class relations and economic distribution in capitalist society. The post-materialist values to which cultural critique or aesthetic critique appeal are authenticity, creativity, spontaneity, elasticity and diversity, rather than solidarity, safety of life and equality of wealth. The new critique is ambiguous insofar as, on the one hand, it contains rational normative intent, while on the other, it also has morally compromising effects. Just as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello analyzed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the demands of cultural criticism, such as autonomy, creativity, authenticity, and liberation, have been absorbed and integrated into the system of new capitalism and have given birth to neoliberal capitalism.⁷

⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 3.

⁶ Karl Polanyi, *Karl Polanyi’s Vision of Socialist Transformation*, eds. Michael Brie and Claus Thomasberger (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2018), 8.

⁷ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 326–327.

Nancy Fraser has pointed out that Donald Trump's supporters are not only disappointed with neoliberal globalization, but are also dissatisfied with progressive new liberalism.⁸ Arguably, progressive new liberalism represents a union of cultural elites from social movements (feminism, multiculturalism and LGBTQ rights) and business elites (from Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood) and the former provide the latter with some strong arguments for rejecting the welfare state. Progressive liberalism is Critical Theory with an emancipatory intent, but its outcome is ambivalent: the ideals of diversity, empowerment and singularity are shared by neoliberalism to enforce its own legitimacy. This is peculiar to the situation today.

3.

Critical Theory, however, has encountered profound retrogression before. In the darkest days of mid-twentieth-century Fascism, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno recommended that the aim of Critical Theory should shift from seeking progress to resisting regression and the evils of Fascism. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin writes:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.⁹

Benjamin advocated dispensing with the ideology of progress, and he noted that “vulgar Marxism” was a major proponent of progressivist ideology:

Social democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a concept of progress which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial and open to criticism.¹⁰

Benjamin opposed blind faith in progressivism, arguing:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of

⁸ Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and beyond,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 4 (2017). <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond>

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 245.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in struggle against Fascism.¹¹

It would not be appropriate to apply Benjamin's Marxist version of anti-progressivism exactly to the present situation, but the similarities between the mid-nineteenth-century's and today's periods of regression are significant. Horkheimer and Adorno also noted that the society of their times "instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."¹² Despite this, they still believed that "social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought," but their prediction of a "new barbarism" reflects the danger of an uncritical orientation toward progress.¹³

And what is progress? Alain de Benoist writes, in *A Brief History of the Idea of Progress*:

The idea of progress seems one of the theoretical presuppositions of modernity. One can even regard it, not without reason, as the real "religion of Western civilization." [...] Progress can be defined as a cumulative process in which the most recent stage is always considered preferable and better, i.e., qualitatively superior, to what preceded it. This definition contains a descriptive element (change takes place in a given direction) and an axiological element (this progression is interpreted as an improvement). Thus it refers to change that is oriented (toward the best), necessary (one does not stop progress), and irreversible (no overall return to the past is possible). Improvement being inescapable, it follows that tomorrow will be always better than today.¹⁴

But human history is not a continuous, accumulative, and ever-improving process; historical progress is often interrupted by disaster and declines into regression. On the other hand, the concept of historical pessimism *as optimism* (the idea that the past was bad, but the future will be an inevitable improvement) is double-edged. The former leads to despair; the latter, which is easily believed, to conformism. As Adorno said:

[P]rogress is not a conclusive category. It wants to cut short the triumph of radical evil, not to triumph as such itself. [...] In this case, progress would transform itself into the resistance to the perpetual danger of relapse. Progress is this resistance at all stages, not the surrender to their steady ascent.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 248–249.

¹² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), xi.

¹³ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁴ Alain de Benoist, "A Brief History of the Idea of Progress," *The Occidental Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 7.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003), 145.

In the twenty-first century, it is important for contemporary Critical Theory to listen to the voices of the previous generations, and seek new a new direction for thought.

4.

Habermas's theory is a theory of progressive reformism. It arises from the post-war era of progressivism, and is a grand discourse on improving the process of progression. Richard J. Bernstein suggests:

One might epitomize Habermas's entire intellectual project and his fundamental stance as writing a new *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – one which does full justice to the dark side of the Enlightenment legacy, explains its cause but nevertheless redeems and justifies the hope of freedom, justice, and happiness which still speaks to us.¹⁶

By the time of introducing his theory of communicative action, Habermas not only reconstructed the normative foundations of Critical Theory, but also reclaimed the concept of progress for liberal thought. In an early work, he proposed that: "Liberation from hunger and misery does not necessarily converge with liberation from servitude and degradation, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labor and interaction. Still, there is a connection between the two dimensions."¹⁷ I argue that the entirety of Habermas's subsequent work addresses, in some way, this early proposal. According to Habermas, labor, or production, liberates the technical forces of production and sustains human material life, whereas human interaction, or communication, sets free the normative power that is contained in practical reason. The two dimensions are interdependent. The concept of progress plays an important and necessary function in Habermas's theory, as David Owen notes: "In order to practice a rational social criticism it is unavoidable to presuppose a conception of social change that gives an account of progressive change."¹⁸ On the immanent criticism of historical materialism, Habermas explained:

The development of productive forces depends on the application of technically useful knowledge; and the basic institutions of a society embody moral-practical knowledge. Progress in these two dimensions is measured against the two universal validity claims we also use to measure the progress of empirical knowledge and of moral-practical insight, namely, the truth of propositions and

¹⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's Jena Philosophy of Mind," in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 169.

¹⁸ David S. Owen, *Between Reason and History: Habermas and the Idea of Progress* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 173.

the rightness of norms. I would like, therefore, to defend the thesis that the criteria of social progress singled out by historical materialism as the development of productive forces and the maturity of forms of social intercourse can be systematically justified.¹⁹

From *The Theory of Communicative Action* to *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas has built on his theoretical edifice. Thomas McCarthy sums up the significance of Habermas's Critical Theory, describing his thought as "empirical philosophy of history with a practical (political) intent." Since the 1980s, Habermas has been fighting two battles: firstly, against neoconservatism, and secondly, against poststructuralism. The former is conceived by Habermas as a theory of modernization without modernity, while the latter he believes is a theory of radical modernity without modernization. For him, neoconservatism is not sensitive to the side-effects of the colonization of the lifeworld, and poststructuralism does not pay adequate attention to the necessity of systems in modern society. Habermas's theoretical achievement is of monumental importance, providing a comprehensive conception of progress that not only gets rid of teleological determinism and teleology, but also successfully rescues its practical and normative content.

Habermas contends that the transformation from liberal capitalism to the welfare state is a progressive process. The restrictions that the social welfare state put on classical liberties cannot be understood as a negation of classic freedom; rather it should be understood as state provision of the material conditions for freedom for the public. The normative intention of the welfare state is justifiable on a normative level, as it tries to eliminate social contingencies induced by the capitalist system and enhance the real opportunities for an equal use of legal freedom. But, for Habermas, "with such overwhelming provisions, the welfare state obviously runs the risk of impairing individual autonomy, precisely the autonomy it is supposed to promote by providing the factual preconditions for equal opportunity to exercise negative freedom."²⁰ This is the dilemma of our times. In order to break the deadlock, he argues: "the social-welfare project must neither be simply continued along the same lines nor be broken off, but must be pursued at a higher level of reflection."²¹ Habermas wants to improve progress with radical democracy. For him, in post-metaphysical times, political legitimacy originates together with private autonomy and public autonomy. Deliberative democracy is the only way of realizing this ideal.

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. and intr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 142.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 407.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

However, the most urgent challenges we face today are not how to overcome the paternalism of the welfare state, but how to save this system from neoliberal globalization; not how to improve “the liberal design of the constitutional state” with a more perfect form of deliberative democracy, but how to sustain the liberal regime of the constitutional state in the face of an overbearing attack from authoritarianism.²² Habermas is not naïve and insensitive to social pathology. His theory not only provides a more reasonable concept, but also diagnoses various forms of communicative deformation in private and public life. But, I note, the focus of his theory is more on the imperfections and dilemmas of the process of progress, rather than on the danger of regression. For example, his discourse theory of democracy is vigilant toward populism, but his criticism targets an unrealistic image of a totalistic democracy of left-wing populism, rather than the danger of authoritarianism posed by right-wing populism.

Habermas believes that over the last two hundred years, Europe has learned to deal with various conflicts of modern society, such as the conflicts between the holy and the secular, market and state, the individual and the collective, rural and urban. The political framework of advanced Western society provides the possibility of private and public freedom. However, these sentiments seem premature today, just as Chinese liberals’ belief that the Enlightenment and the normative beliefs of modernity were securely installed in their country. I argue that Habermas makes an overly optimistic evaluation of Western developed society, and fails to realize the possibility of retrogression. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he points out, “the new conflicts arise along the seams between system and lifeworld.”²³ According to him:

In advanced Western societies conflicts have developed in the last ten to twenty years that deviate in various respects from the social-welfare-state patterns of institutionalized conflict over distribution. They do not flare up in areas of material reproduction; they are not channeled through parties and associations; and they are not allayed by compensations that conform to the system. Rather, these new conflicts arise in areas of cultural reproduction, of social integration and socialization; they are carried out in subinstitutional, or at least extraparliamentary, forms of protest; and the deficits that underlie them reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action, which cannot be gotten at via the media of money and power. It is not primarily a question of compensations that the social-welfare state can provide, but of protecting and restoring endangered ways of life or of establishing reformed ways of life. In short, the new conflicts do not flare up around problems of distribution, but around questions concerning the grammar of forms of life.²⁴

²² Ibid., xli.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 395.

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 392.

Habermas believed those new resistances and protests are a revolution which signal the shift from the old politics to new politics. Looking back, Habermas made his conclusion too soon. Even though the “new politics” succeeded in many areas, it has not yet resolved the problems of the “old politics.” Even developed Western societies have not tamed the vagaries of the market and reached more just distribution of material wealth, nor have they eliminated the threat of the resurgence of authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. The tension between capitalism and democracy, the universal morality and ethnic identity have not reconciled. I believe the radical democratic ideal advocated by Habermas is still a valuable ideal of human emancipation, just as Habermas said: the modernity is an unfinished project, but first of all the achievements and advances liberalism has made need to be secured to prevent society from retrogression. This does not mean making a choice between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, but that a new assessment of liberal society’s values and goals is necessary.

I argue that universality has to come before cultural pluralism. We should reclaim the priority of universal human rights to identity politics, social issues to cultural issues, politics of distribution to politics of recognition. It does not mean the latter terms are wrong, it just means the former terms are more important and urgent to liberal democratic society.

In a complex modernity, good things do not come together. If there are conflicts among the desirable values, we have to make choices among them. Today, progressive liberalism must seek out a feasible solution to resist the spread of right-wing populism and authoritarianism around the world, instead of resting on its illusory laurels, even as the world falls into destruction. In past half century, we learned lesson from history that the intention of social criticism and its results often contradict one another. During this period, the progressive new liberalism (the so-called “white left”) has dominated the agenda of left-wing politics, left-wing politics has made a great achievements in political democracy and liberalization of social life, but it is misleading to claim that the “new politics” must replace the “old politics,” or that the “new politics” is the only possible form of progressive politics. Today, it is easier for us to see that liberal politics does not come down to a choice between beating drums or waving flowers. We should rather concede that there are multiple types of progressive politics. Some key concerns of the traditional left, such as economic security, equality, prosperity, and solidarity are just as important as the more contemporary left’s fight for cultural diversity, social inclusion, empowerment, representation and recognition. If the left gives up the requirements of economic equality and social solidarity, there would be little to distinguish new liberalism from neoliberalism.

For today’s Critical Theorists, to take a step back is, in this case, to take two steps forward: only we can succeed in resisting social retrogression, can we start

to setting up the agenda of progress again. I recalled Adorno's notion above that the liberal concept of progress "wants to cut short the triumph of radical evil, not to triumph as such itself." Finally, in these days of crisis for left liberal thought, let us also keep in mind the famous motto attributed to Romain Rolland but taken up and popularized by Antonio Gramsci: "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will!"²⁵

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²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings, Vol. 1: 1910–1920*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 188.