Reclaiming the Future for Humanity

Perspectives on Progress

By

Margaret A. Majumdar

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This book first published 2024

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-905-2

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-906-9

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-80441-907-6

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Introduction

This may seem a strange time to be writing about progress, given the state of crisis which prevails on many different levels. Not only has humanity had to face the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic without, even now, the full knowledge to be able to deal with it effectively, but also the conditions necessary for human life on this planet are increasingly under threat, as a result of climate change, destruction of natural habitats, environmental degradation and overexploitation of the earth's resources (Dasgupta 2021). In addition, human beings living in different countries and societies across the globe are having to deal with conflict and wars, economic, political and social breakdown, challenges to democracy, the staggering rise in inequality and the hegemony of political unreason (Chomsky 2020).

Yet this is precisely the time to be thinking about progress – how to move forward, how to make things better. The more it seems that humans are no longer in charge of their fate but are prey to disease, natural catastrophes, manmade disasters, political turmoil, war and brutality, the more necessary it appears to revisit some of the ways in which people have thought about progress in the past, to review critically what may still be valid in some of these ideas, to appraise the current possibilities for turning things around and to develop new ways of envisaging a feasible way forward.

Much has been written about progress, which is a term that can have many different meanings for many different individuals, depending on their particular viewpoint, their political inclinations and sometimes their psychological temperament and area of enquiry or concern. Sometimes people's attitudes to progress are defined in terms of whether their individual viewpoint tends to see the glass as half-full or as half-empty. Even more importantly, attitudes may be more fundamentally determined by the material situation in which people find themselves, whether as beneficiaries of particular social and political systems or whether as the victims of exploitation, oppression, war, inequality and hunger.

This, of course, is to remain at the level of the superficial and the aim of this book is to dig a little deeper beyond some of the trite political utterances that either attempt to sway people into believing that 'things can only get better', that certain ideologies will lead inevitably to progress, or else to accept the 'fact' that nothing can really change. The latter aim to persuade that any hope of improving the fundamental nature of the economic, political and social system and the quality of people's everyday lives is based on an illusion or, again, that only individuals can improve their situation through their own efforts. A further variant argues that attempts to bring about something better always end in disaster.

For instance, on the theoretical level, John Gray is one of the keenest critics of progress at the present time and of the hubris of humans as purportedly rational beings (Gray 2002). Will Self, reviewing Slavoj Žižek's *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* in the *Guardian*, claims that 'For Gray, Žižek (…) represents just another iteration of the post-Enlightenment delusion of "scientifically" political "progress" (Self 2017).

So, talking about progress poses the fundamental question of whether we can make a better future or whether, in the face of a pessimistic view of 'human nature', we are doomed to make the best of a bad job.

The critiques of progress, that are currently the most predominant, fall into several categories, broadly speaking. Firstly, there was the triumphalist discourse that proclaims the present hegemony of capitalism to be the highest stage of civilisation and progress. Therefore, there is no need to strive to go beyond this model. We have reached the end of history and all that remains is to ensure that others, who are so far unaware of the benefits of liberal democratic capitalism or reluctant to accept them, toe the line and join in. Secondly, there is the more negative way of thinking that all attempts to improve societies are doomed to fail in the face of historical and human realities, that the desire to achieve progress is based on a utopian illusion, that selfishness, greed and the will to dominate over others will always hold sway, as the result of the basic essence of human nature. Thirdly, there is the idea that the whole notion of progress is an invention of the 'West', that it is inevitably bound up in the rationalisation of

imperialism and colonialism and their contemporary avatars and that it is, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, an ideological support to maintaining the majority world in subservience to the most powerful. Given all these different critical arguments, the question that we might need to answer is whether there is a case in favour of progress and what form it might take.

There is no doubt that certain periods of history have favoured a more positive outlook on the possibility of progress. This was evident in the period following the ending of the Second World War, when there was a general expectation in Europe of a better future. This was well brought out by Ken Loach in his 2013 film, *The Spirit of 45*. In more recent times, many would say that the dominant mood in Europe and North America in the 1960s, certainly among the young, was in tune with the idea that everything was possible, a better society could be achieved, the old and the bad could be thrown aside and replaced with the radically new, with a superior form of social organisation and the legitimisation of individual self-fulfilment. This was, of course, never universally accepted at the time. However, in what is sometimes portrayed as a backlash to this, a new dominant discourse emerged from the late 1970s, that not only blames the Sixties for many of society's current ills, as did the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, in a speech during his presidential campaign of 2007, blaming the legacy of May '68 for many of the problems currently facing France (Reynolds 2011). It also goes further to deny the very possibility of progress. This discourse takes many different forms - from commonplace clichés reproduced in the popular press and transmitted through social media, via more reasonable-sounding arguments based on analyses of previous failed attempts to improve things, to fully-fledged postmodernist and other philosophies and would-be learned tomes that aspire to giving theoretical legs to the predominant progress naysayers.

On the larger international scale, the triumph of anticolonial struggles and national liberation movements from the mid-20th century and especially after the end of the Second World War also led to a burst of optimism, accompanied by a belief in the need for progress and development in the newly independent ex-colonies. This too would be brought into question, when development was stymied by the persistent inequalities in economic and political relations, as a result of the dominance of global capitalist

forces. Again, the critiques were not focused on the actual causes of the lack of progress, but overwhelmingly on purported factors such as endemic corruption, the historical backwardness of certain societies, purported differences in intelligence and lower cultural levels, along with inherent tendencies to internecine tribal and sectarian violence. Alain Badiou is not the first to portray the interventions of the Western powers in so-called 'Third World' countries in terms of a modern-day version of the 'white man's burden'. In his *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, he specifically claims that these 'humanitarian' interventions are based on an ethics which sees these others as subhuman, reduced to animals, incapable of engaging in politics themselves, but relying on the good Man, the white Man, to protect them (Badiou 2013).

The collapse of Soviet-style communism, culminating in the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 did not just usher in a realignment of international power relations but also appeared to deal a mortal blow to the ideologies of socialism and communism that had inspired millions to fight for a better world for almost two centuries. Certainly, this appeared to be borne out by the triumphalism of neoliberal globalisation and the spread of a uniformity of thinking, which held to the insuperability of capitalism, paid lip service to the values of the free market, while bowing down before the uncontrolled forces of global finance.

The demise of the notion of progress has, of course, been theorised in a number of ways. Critics have attacked the notion for its supposed 'Eurocentrism'; development theory has been discredited; modernity and the linear notion of time associated with it have also come under attack. Ironically, as Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out, these critiques have sometimes used the notion of progress to criticise progress:

> With the application of more and more sophisticated critiques of progress – Eurocentrism, development theories, modernity and its 'homogeneous and empty notion of time' -, we believe that we have identified and gone beyond this assumption in our time. Going further, we proclaim that we have *progressed* beyond this concept – thus returning to a rhetoric that is ironically part and parcel of the

> same teleological narrative model that we thought we were leaving behind us (Badiou & Žižek 2010: 93).[1]*

Buck-Morss insists that social progress has taken place in history and cites the Saint-Domingue revolution and the abolition of slavery, the workers' internationalist struggle and the women's struggle, although perhaps some of her other examples are more debatable (Badiou & Žižek 2010: 97).

Yet, in spite of this powerful mass of negativity, there are still voices that are raised to argue for the need for progress, there are still individuals who strive relentlessly to make themselves into better people, there are still people who are prepared to campaign to make their communities and societies better, there are still organised attempts to make the planet a better place to live and to stretch the frontiers of human achievement. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the drive for progress is one of the fundamental characteristics of the human species, whether this is expressed in terms of individual self-improvement or more general collective social forces and movements. Even those who appear to others to be pursuing a backward path do not generally see their own actions and purposes as regressive but rather as making progress towards a higher goal.

No-one can deny that individuals throughout the globe are constantly striving to improve their physique, through fitness, diet, exercise or lifestyle programmes, as well as their intellectual capabilities, through the pursuit of knowledge and problem-solving solutions. The Olympic slogan of 'Faster, higher, stronger!' is a powerful indication of the human urge to strive to achieve physical progress. Moreover, no-one can deny the forces that push people to seek moral or religious self-improvement, under the inspiration of various ideologies, some transcending the human to invoke supernatural or divine powers.

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[1] 'A force de critiques du progrès de plus en plus sophistiquées – l'eurocentrisme, les théories du développement, la modernité et son "temps homogène et vide" -, nous estimons avoir identifié et transcendé ce biais dans notre temps. Plus encore, nous affirmons avoir *progressé* au-delà de cette conception – revenant ainsi à une rhétorique ironiquement inscrite dans le même mode téléologique de narration que nous entendions laisser derrière nous.' (Badiou & Žižek 2010: 93)

**Please note that all translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.*

Yet, as a notion, progress makes no sense outside of humanity. Not only are human beings uniquely capable of bringing it about, but also it is only from human beings that it acquires its meaning. Progress can thus be seen in terms of the individual self, a group or collective (such as a nation or a class) or of humanity as a whole, whether this be the biological notion of the improvement of the species or through political theories founded on internationalism. It can also be integrally linked to certain processes, in which human beings come together to create structures and institutions, which lead to further development and progress, acquiring their own momentum, continuities and discontinuities, as in the case of science in its various branches. Paradoxically, some of those who dismiss the possibility of progress most vociferously, will also claim that the economy, in its developed capitalist form, is somehow exempt from their critique, and is inherently ruled by the onward drive of progress, in the form of capital accumulation.

Clearly, alongside progress, one also has to consider the notion of decline. There exists evidence of decline, or regression, in the case of individuals, families, nations, classes, perhaps even humanity as a whole. It is commonplace to define unpleasant actions by individuals or groups, violent movements, based on the practice of atrocities, torture and physical brutality as a descent into barbarism or a reversion to the Middle Ages, which have acquired the perhaps undeserved reputation as singularly violent and merciless.

Equally well, there is no necessary correlation between decline and progress in one context, or for one group, and decline and progress for the species as a whole. Nations may rise and fall, but their fall may also be accompanied by progress in another field.

It is clear, however, that one cannot discuss progress without getting to grips with the question of human violence, aggression and 'aberration', with the notion of 'human nature' and how it is perceived and misused.

The assumptions of the European Enlightenment have certainly been challenged. The onward progress of humanity driven by the development of science, the rational outlook, the principles of political modernity, the

forces of 'civilisation', was fatally undermined by the brutal history of imperialism and colonialism, the horrors of industrial-scale war in the twentieth century, the development of systems of rule based on racial and religious genocide. There has indeed been a retreat from the belief in the division of European political thought into two camps, represented by the forces of progress on the one hand and the forces of reaction on the other. Indeed, the very Enlightenment itself has been increasingly exposed as fundamentally flawed from its origins.

The political modernity that arose as a system of ideas, beliefs and representations, promoting human freedom and equality, accompanied the growth of capitalism as an economic system and provided the ideas of liberation that enabled new forms of production and new economic and social relations to take hold and establish themselves. As such, it is also deeply marked by the fault lines that have been characteristic of the history of capitalist development – the contradictions between capital and labour, racial inequality and domination, gender oppression and exclusion. Slavery and colonial domination were not accidental by-products of the developing capitalist mode of production and modern nations and societies, but were integral to their success from the outset. Thus, the question of race and the relationship of racial theories to the notion of progress are not side issues; they are not something that has been instrumentalised only by the forces of reaction, but have been there at the heart of modern European thinking since the outset.

One of the main thrusts of this book will deal with the role of the 'West' and whether there is a link between its perceived decline and contemporary critiques of the idea of progress. The decline of the 'West' is of course associated with the rise of the rest – or, at least, some of them. The decline of the 'West' has indeed been debated for many years, along with the role played by imperialism, decolonisation and the ending of empire in this decline. Oswald Spengler, with his *Decline of the West*, published in two volumes in 1918 and 1922, was an important intellectual figure at the beginning of the twentieth century (Spengler 1918-1922). Influenced by Goethe and Nietzsche, he saw an almost inevitable rise and fall of different civilisations across the course of world history, although many who grappled with his ideas, took his writings as a clarion call to those of

European origin to rise to the challenge and prevent the demise of the 'West'. This call to resist the 'temptation' facing the 'West' was notably articulated by André Malraux in his *Temptation of the West* (Malraux 1926). Others, such as Rabindranath Tagore, writing at around the same time, developed a critical approach to 'Western' civilisation from outside its tradition, yet, at the same time, engaging with it when appropriate, as in his substantial correspondence with French novelist, Romain Rolland (Tagore 2018).

However, one might say that it is really only now that the formerly colonised or semi-colonised are coming into their own and changing the balance of power. This is not to say that progress as an idea or an ideal is limited to specific geopolitical rises and falls. It is surely wider than this and possibly even a general characteristic of humanity as a whole, in its aspirations and historical practice.

Then there is the important question of gender. At various moments in history and in different cultures, but mainly as part of the European Enlightenment tradition, women's status and position have been seen as markers of the stage of progress reached by the civilisation process. In this, the French Enlightenment thinker, Condorcet, one of the key champions of human progress, extended his vision of the perfectibility of humanity through the application of reason and science to the acquisition of ever greater knowledge, to a conviction that all humans, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or religion, were equal and should possess equal rights. In the early period of the French Revolution, he already advocated the inclusion of women in the republic with full citizenship and political rights, with the publication of his *Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cité* in 1790 (*On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship*). Unlike some other Enlightenment thinkers, Condorcet not only attributed the inferior status and backwardness of women to the fact of their exclusion from education, he also argued for their inherent equality with men and their capacity to 'acquire moral ideas' and capacity to use their reason.

> The rights of men stem exclusively from the fact that they are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning upon them. Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily

> also have the same rights. Either no member of the human race has any true rights, or else they all have the same ones; and anyone who votes against the rights of another, whatever his religion, colour or sex, automatically forfeits his own (Condorcet (1790) 2012: 156-157).[2]

This was integral to his conception of the potential for humanity to progress continuously from a state of savagery on a par with that of other animals towards greater perfection through rational and scientific knowledge, the search for virtue in the ethical sphere, as well as the pursuit of happiness. This vision was set out in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (*Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*), published posthumously after his death in 1794 (Condorcet (1795).

Not all French Enlightenment thinkers followed Condorcet as far down the path of gender equality, with the notable exception of the Utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, who insisted that social progress was determined by the progress of women towards liberty.

> … as a general proposition: *Social progress and changes of [social] Period occur by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and the decline in the social Order occurs by virtue of the decrease in women's liberty….*
>
> To sum up, *the extension of the privileges of women is the general principle of all social progress.* (Fourier (1841) 1996: 132)[3]

Fourier placed a particular emphasis on the importance of sexual liberation in the move towards social progress and was not a big fan of the constraints of monogamy and other social regulation of sexuality. On the more general level of gender equality, actual practice has in fact fallen far short in respect of the theory, though this has not prevented the so-called superior values

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[2] Translation by editors, O'Connor and Arago. 'Les droits des hommes résultent uniquement de ce qu'ils sont des êtres sensibles, susceptibles d'acquérir des idées morales, et de raisonner sur ces idées. Ainsi les femmes ayant ces mêmes qualités, ont nécessairement des droits égaux.' (Condorcet (1790) 1847 : 122)

[3] Translation by Ian Patterson. 'En thèse générale : Les progrès sociaux et les changements de Période s'opèrent en raison des progrès des femmes vers la liberté, et les Décadences d'Ordre social s'opèrent en raison du décroissement de la liberté des femmes.' (Fourier (1808) 1841 :195).

of 'Western' civilisation in this respect from being flaunted as part of the rationalisation for waging war against those societies deemed backward.

Gender equality is not seen as the only measure for determining how progressive a society is. There are many other factors that can be considered. For instance, one of these can be the way in which the elderly are treated and the role assigned to them in society, once their economic utility is not as strong as it once was. There is also the question of the treatment of disabled members of society – how they are cared for, indeed, whether they are cared for at all. Then, there is the question of how those perceived to be outside social norms as a result of mental illness are defined and then treated (Laing 1960; Foucault 1961). Another important marker of the level of civilisation could be the way in which crime and punishment are handled (Foucault 1975).

Let us put to one side the ideological abuses of the notion of progress for a moment. What has become clear is that the notion of a universal onward march of civilisation, involving and incorporating the whole of the human race in the same historical process, is a notion that needs rethinking and is being rethought and challenged in a number of different ways.

Many of these new ways of thinking are linked to a critique of the 'West' and 'its utilitarian Reason and its toxic false universalism' as Evelyne Pieiller puts it (Pieiller 2020).[4] The Argentinian semiotician and philosopher, Walter Mignolo, is a key thinker in this regard. Taking inspiration from the Zapatistas' 'decolonial political vision', he champions the notion of the 'pluriverse', in which 'many worlds would co-exist' (Mignolo, 'Foreword' in Reiter 2018: ix). Aram Ziai has also drawn on the Zapatista slogan – 'a world in which many worlds fit', stressing that he is not talking about one alternative world but one where different alternatives can fit so that none is subordinate to any other and there is equal self-determination for all (Ziai in Reiter 2018: 121).

This is not just a defence of the right to diversity; it is something more fundamental than that. Not only does Mignolo claim that 'Western' thought prevents the very possibility of pluriversality through its

[4] '… sa "raison" utilitariste et son universalisme erroné et toxique.'(Pieiller 2020)

epistemology and hermeneutics 'embedded in the self-proclaimed universality of Western cosmology' (Mignolo, 'Foreword' in Reiter 2018: ix), he also suggests that the idea of modernity, linked inseparably with the development of coloniality, in fact serves as the Trojan horse for the pretensions of 'Western' universality. This critique extends to the concept of the 'human' and 'humanity' itself, which he sees as inventions of the colonial worldview and providing 'the point of reference for the invention of racism and sexism together with the invention of nature' (Walter D. Mignolo profile at Duke University, https://culturalanthropology .duke.edu/people/walter-mignolo , accessed 17/9/2019).

We shall attempt to deal with some of the issues raised here (and indeed elsewhere) throughout the course of this book. In particular, we will look at the tension that is at the core of these debates, between the idea of different cultures, different ways of thinking, different and entangled epistemologies, and the global reach of capitalism as a world economic system with its overarching geopolitical relations and structures. We will also highlight the role of science and scientific knowledge, and the issues associated with it on the global level. We will consider the questions of the unity of humanity, especially in the face of a universal or near-universal capitalist system, the problems affecting humanity in its planetary context as a whole and the need for joint collective action to overcome them.

It is clear that the universalist ideal was flawed from its inception, most comprehensively by the exclusion of certain categories of humans from the human race, or by their inclusion but only in a subservient, minor capacity, as was the case for women in many contexts, or by dint of a deferred membership for many racially defined groups, indefinitely put back until such time as they were deemed to have achieved an acceptable degree of civilisation.

However, universalism was also challenged by the very real differences that existed and continue to exist between different peoples and their geographic, economic, cultural, social and political contexts. The fact that different societies will develop at their own pace and in very different ways is undeniable. Moreover, not only is uneven development to be expected, but the phenomenon has been dramatically accentuated by the global

spread of capitalist imperialism with its relations of dominance and exploitation. It is clear that there has never been an ongoing, linear progress across the globe. Not only that but it also a fact that there may also be regression at the same time as progress; societies, peoples, cultures, economies, nations are all prone to going backwards, as well as forwards, even if there is no agreement on what actually constitutes progress. There is no single onward march of history and no single model of what the better society should be like. Relevant here is Bruno Latour's recent critique of French President Macron's idea of a 'single track towards progress',[5] in relation to his rejection of the demand for a moratorium on the deployment of 5G network technology. As Latour puts it: 'Are there no points governing the train of progress? It appears that, for our President, it is on a single-track rail. If you don't go straight ahead, then all you can do is 'reverse', by which is meant 'go backwards', and, as he recently affirmed, revert to 'oil lamps' for lighting.' For Latour, on the contrary, the recent pandemic crisis has led to many people questioning the irreversible march of progress, and to open up new, multifaceted possibilities for development, apart from those that had been accepted as inevitable so far.

This does not inevitably lead to an uncritical acceptance of the premises of theorists of postmodernity, which have undermined the older certainties and thrown doubt on the possibility of overarching theories and narratives, as well as on the foundation of objective interpretations of the world in human rationality and scientific methods. As Richard J. Evans put it, when talking about the validity of the 'what if?', 'counterfactual' approach to history in relation to World War I:

> Perhaps it's because we're living in a postmodern age where the idea of progress has largely disappeared, to be replaced by uncertainty and doubt, and where linear notions of time have become blurred; or because truth and fiction no longer seem such polar opposites as they once did; or because historians now have more licence to be subjective than they used to. But it's time to be sceptical about this

[5] '… voie unique vers le progrès […] 'Le train du progrès a-t-il des aiguillages ? Apparemment, pour notre président, il s'agit d'une voix unique. Si vous n'allez pas tout droit, vous ne pouvez que « revenir en arrière », ce qui veut dire « régresser », et, comme il l'a récemment affirmé, s'éclairer à « la lampe à huile »' (*Le Monde* 24.9.2020).

> trend. We need, in this year especially, to start to try to understand why the first world war happened, not to wish that it hadn't, or argue about whether it was "right" or "wrong". In the effort to understand, counterfactuals aren't any real use at all. (Evans 2014: 15)

Even if one may accept a more nuanced approach to the history of human development, this does not mean that progress itself has become impossible or redundant. One of the ideas that will be explored in this book is the correlation between a belief in the possibility of progress and the existence of a collective movement of people willing to take action together to bring it about. Another question which will be at the forefront of our concerns relates to the very definition of progress. What is it? How can it be assessed? Is it desirable and, if so, what form should it take? How can it be achieved? How can it be defended? These questions lead us to further questions. Are we in control of our future? Can human beings evolve further? How can we define a better future? Can human beings function without a sense of progress? Is it an essential human characteristic?

Is the very existence of human beings threatened by the unbridled damage done to the planet destroying the basic necessities of human life on earth, on the one hand? At the same time, will the development of technology to replace many of the functions currently performed by humans through artificial intelligence (AI) and other means lead inexorably to the replacement and subordination of human beings to their own technological creations? Will we experience a loss of competency and powers which will bring us under the control and supremacy of our own creations, as long imagined in the works of science fiction? Will interventions through biotechnology and genetic manipulation lead to definitively modified organisms and individuals? Will these developments lead to the evolution of human beings into a new species of being, as the transhumanists would lead us to believe? Are these processes already so developed that it is too late to row back? (Mukherjee 2017: 467)

One thing that is clear is that progress as a category cannot be applied to all areas of experience – certainly not in the same way. In economics, and perhaps in material things in general, progress may be readily measurable. It is possible to quantify progress, though with all kinds of caveats

regarding the distinction to be drawn between quantitative and qualitative kinds of progress. Thus, it is possible to measure economic growth in terms of GDP, trade balances, assets and liabilities, availability of natural and human resources, productivity, financial reserves and so on. It is also possible to measure other indicators of economic and social development, such as employment levels, poverty levels, infant mortality and life expectancy, prevalence of diseases, availability and effectiveness of healthcare and treatments, school attendance, literacy levels and so on. Where difficulties begin to arise, is when it comes to determining the value to be given to such statistical information. Moreover, in the debates linked to the notion of progress, it cannot be assumed that there is a consensus around its necessity or desirability. This is particularly clear when progress is associated with the idea of modernity, or modernisation, as it so often is.

While there are schools of thought and branches of science that use the concept of progress, or something akin to it, in the study of natural processes, such as the development and evolution of species, this is not the intended emphasis of this book. Here, the focus is much more on progress as a concept, that fundamentally makes sense in terms of human beings' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. This is progress that can be measured against defined human values: the lessening of suffering, satisfaction of basic human wants, implementation of higher moral values, inclusion of a greater number of people, greater equality, better quality of life, less waste of human life, greater sensual enjoyment, higher sense of cultural and spiritual satisfaction. It is clear that this interpretation of 'progress' cannot be dissociated from the question of 'value'. At the same time, it has an indisputable link to the incremental growth in knowledge and explanation of natural and human reality through the development of science.

Ultimately, this book is concerned with the human condition and the quest of humans for a better future. Inevitably, any discussion of the human condition raises the question of what is specific to human beings. How do we differ from other species? Are humans different from animals by dint of their reason, culture, imagination, technique, ethics or all of these? Are human beings a higher form of life, in which instincts may be subordinated to reason, culture, ethics, even if they sometimes, or often, are not? Or are

animals superior for mainly acting in accordance with their instincts for survival purposes on the whole, whereas humans are capable of engaging in aggressive, deviant behaviour for a variety of different reasons, some of which may be gratuitous? Have the differences between humans and animals been grossly exaggerated, as some would maintain, in the interests of promoting the role of humankind at the top of the hierarchy of natural beings?

For instance, writing about the relationship of human beings to the rest of the natural world, the writer and filmmaker, Evelyne Pieiller, refers to the arrogance of some conceptions of the human – believing that the earth belongs to them rather than them belonging to the earth. She points to the challenges that are being made to this notion and its replacement by a recognition of the links and interrelations between all animal and vegetable species in the natural world (Pieiller 2020).

It is now widely accepted that the advent of the Anthropocene geological era has come into being, where the effects of humans and their activities have become the prime motor of changes affecting the ecosystems of the planet. Concern about these developments has started to bring about a shift in ideas about the place of humans in the world. Increasingly critical of the notion of humans as masters and possessors of nature, given their destructive potential, there is an increased consciousness of the need to create new ways of living in the world and living a 'good life'. As Pieiller says:

> Thus, a number of movements are bringing together, albeit with different emphases, the rejection of an anthropocentric system, often seen as specific to the West and its conception of capitalism-associated modernity, with the quest for an active ethics, capable of undermining the dominations so entrenched under the weight of a centuries-old ideology that they have come to seem … natural.[6]

[6] De nombreux mouvements conjuguent ainsi, avec des accents divers, le rejet d'un système anthropocentré, souvent considéré comme propre à l'Occident et à sa conception de la modernité, identifiée au capitalisme, et la quête d'une morale active, déjouant les dominations si enkystées par le poids d'une idéologie séculaire qu'elles en sont devenues comme… naturelles. (Pieiller 2020)

These movements represent challenges to the concept of Man as Master of the Universe. Yet, there has always been another side to the notion of the 'survival of the fittest', as applied to human beings. On the other side of the coinage of social Darwinism and the predominance of notion of the 'selfish gene' (Dawkins 1976), may be found numerous examples of human cooperation and self-sacrifice for the common good.

> Yet, as a 'Promethean' man, locked in his ego, proud of his uniqueness and superiority in the kingdom of living things, with his habit of seeing the world as an arena of combat, in which the winner is the one with the most advantages, how could such a man become so radically transformed? This is where an old notion comes into its own, one which is the very opposite of the cliché that 'man is a wolf unto man': could it not possibly be that the capacity for mutual aid and cooperation, a tendency that is played down, even disregarded, by capitalist ideology, is not just a characteristic of 'other earthly species' but also of the human species itself?[7]

There are no definitive answers to these questions involving distinctions and definitions of the human, given that the category of human is not fixed and eternal but subject to historical processes. Moreover, these historical processes have undoubtedly had an effect on what it means to be human across the centuries. Some of the most important of these processes impinging on the human reality have included the growth of science and knowledge; the development of technology and techniques of production; changes in religious and cultural attitudes; the rise of different political ideas and values; the transformation of gender-based relations and hierarchies; the division of labour and changes in the division of labour; changes in the value attached to individual human lives. Thus, it is not a case of human nature being defined as either good or bad, but rather as 'a

[7] Mais comment l'homme « prométhéen » enfermé dans son ego, fier de sa singularité, de sa supériorité dans le règne du vivant, habitué à voir le monde comme une arène de combat où gagne celui qui a le plus d'atouts, pourrait-il se transformer aussi radicalement ? C'est là qu'intervient la mise en avant d'une vieille notion, l'opposé même du cliché « l'homme est un loup pour l'homme » : l'aptitude à l'entraide et à la coopération, disposition minorée, voire ignorée, par l'idéologie capitaliste, ne serait pas qu'une caractéristique des « autres terrestres », mais également de l'espèce humaine. (Pieiller 2020)

set of potentialities, including genetically determined ones, which are going to be brought into play by the structures and ideologies of their societies'. (Pieiller 2020)[8]

At the same time, a reassessment of the role of humans in the natural world does not necessarily imply the abdication of human responsibility for the problems created by humans. Many of these are specifically attributable to the effects of global capitalism and need to be tackled as such. The struggles of ecologists and anti-capitalists are not mutually exclusive.

> The struggle against social injustice, against exploitation, against alienation, can tend to be subsumed by the celebration of interrelations. And this plea to raise the spirit to a higher level and to reject 'interests as the axiomatic premise', to quote Alain Caillée, may favour traditionalists decrying progress, sentimental believers in utopia, fervent believers in the community of all living things, where conflicts of interest would fade away. Yet, with its powerful appeal and full of its communal spirit, it may also force materialist thinking to sharpen its message into a critical perspective and thus play a part in the renewal of the forces of progress.(Pieiller 2020)[9]

Just as the Romantics turned to nature as a kind of therapy, more beneficial than political activity, drug-taking and so on, there is increasingly a movement to seek solace in the natural world. As Wordsworth put it:

> These beauteous forms,
> Through a long absence, have not been to me
> As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
> But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din

[8] '… un ensemble de potentialités, y compris génétiques, que vont activer les cadres et les idéologies des sociétés.' (Pieiller 2020)

[9] 'La lutte contre l'injustice sociale, contre l'exploitation, contre l'aliénation, disparaît dans la célébration des interrelations. Et cette incitation à l'élévation de l'âme et au refus de l'« a*xiomatique de l'intérêt* », pour citer Alain Caillée, peut faire le bonheur de passéistes dénonçant le progrès, d'utopistes sentimentaux, de fervents de l'appartenance à la communauté du vivant, où se dilueraient les conflits d'intérêts. Mais, forte de sa résonance, riche de son désir de partage, elle peut aussi, mise en perspective critique par une pensée matérialiste qu'elle oblige à s'affûter, contribuer pour partie à un renouvellement des forces progressistes.' (Pieiller 2020)

Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(Wordsworth (1798) 1880: 115)

Following in Wordsworth's footsteps in walking the countryside, the natural world can seem to provide peace and serenity, the 'tranquil restoration' referred to in his poem, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798'. It can offer itself as an antidote to the modern (capitalist) world. Present-day activities such as wild swimming and forest bathing offer an escape from the stresses and strains of everyday, largely urban life. However, these walks in the woods, often with their mystical and spiritualist overtones of communion with the forests and nature, do not challenge the relationship between the humans and non-humans in any meaningful way and do little to address the economic, social and political

relations that govern modern society and have led to the destructive effects of human beings on planet earth.

Increasingly, as the opposition between 'nature' and modern society steeped in the ideas of the Enlightenment is challenged by some anthropologists, sociologists and ecologists, the rights of 'non-humans' to play a full role in the ongoing and future life of the planet are emphasised and argued for (Poupeau 2020).

As Anna Tsing has argued:

> Over the last few decades, a number of researchers from different perspectives have shown that limiting our narratives to human protagonists was not merely a natural tendency but implied a cultural practice that was structured and imbued with dreams of progress linked to modernisation.[10]

She is particularly keen to stress the role of many different actors and activities, both human and nonhuman, in the creation of natural environments. Forests have a particular role to play in thinking of this kind (cf. Wohlleben 2017; Zürcher 2016 and many other recent titles). Indeed, forests have long played the role of counterfoil to 'civilisation' in much European culture, as in the fairy stories of the Brothers Grimm and others. 'The mysticism surrounding trees echoes like a call to the invisible, to the exaltation of the ancient wisdom of "*the first peoples*", bearers of "*another kind of knowledge*": a search for the lost meaning of human existence.'[11]

This Romantic notion of forests is often counterposed to the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment. For instance, stage designer, Es Devlin, made a plan to transform the stone courtyard of Somerset House into an

[10] Au cours des dernières décennies, de nombreux chercheurs d'horizons différents ont montré que limiter nos récits aux protagonistes humains n'était pas seulement un banal réflexe, mais suggérait une pratique culturelle, structurée et hantée par les rêves de progrès liés à la modernisation. (Tsing 2017)

[11] 'La mystique des arbres résonne comme un appel à l'invisible, à l'exaltation des sagesses ancestrales des « *peuples originaires* », porteurs d'un « *autre savoir* » : une quête du sens perdu de l'existence humaine.' (Poupeau 2020; Zürcher 2016)

enchanted woodland, for the 2021 London Design Biennale. She was inspired to do this upon 'discovering that the Enlightenment principles on which the building was conceived forbade the introduction of trees into the courtyard.' Her project was thus 'to counter this attitude of human dominance over nature, by allowing a forest to overtake the entire courtyard.' (*The Guardian*, 5 March 2021) Forests are often seen as places of transformation in literature, as is Shakespeare's Forest of Arden or the forests of the Brothers Grimm.

For some (Tsing 2017), there are already cracks in the system created by capitalism, pockets in which modes of living outside capitalism have been made possible. Poupeau points out some of the tensions within this type of ecological anthropology, as, for instance, in respect of Bruce Albert's book of text and images of the Amazon, produced in collaboration with a local leader, Davi Kopenawa, who defends the idea of *yanomani*, the concept of a symbiotic, traditional relationship and way of life in the Amazon forest (Albert & Kopenawa 2003).

> The book develops through two voices, in line with the artistic creations designed to accentuate the parallel between the externality of traditional metaphysics and the 'wild thought' coiled in the heart of the West, evoking the way in which Amazonian societies live with the forest, the importance of Shamans, etc.: a world in which humans and non-humans are considered to form part of the same 'cosmic totality' yet connected through the same 'economy of metamorphoses'. Yet the form of the book, and in particular, the aesthetic character of the photographs, gives rise to the impression that the indigenous leader is simply reproducing the primitivistic discourse that any environmentalist association would expect from him; the earthly matter of the forest is thus said to possess a 'living breath' that the 'Whites' have never been able to perceive. Defending the trees thus becomes a global political cause: the cause of indigenous communities who are fully assimilated into the

> authenticity of nature and threatened by the predations of capitalism which is never actually acknowledged by name.[12]

In a sense, this approach can lead to a new form of differentiation of humans, much along the lines of the colonial divide between colonised and coloniser, between enlightened rationalists and primitive mystics, between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'. Much of the thinking about the Anthropocene, while pointing rightly to the responsibility of human beings in creating negative effects on planet earth, not only takes as its basis an ideal of an original paradise on earth, akin to the notion of the 'perfect planet' dear to David Attenborough's heart, as portrayed in his BBC television series first broadcast in January 2021, but also sometimes fail to identify the particular modes of operation and mind-sets at the heart of the economic, political and social system that is capitalism.

Indeed, the ongoing dynamics of imperialism in the economic and political sphere have also been closely imbricated in the relationships between humans and the natural world. The creation of natural parks and reserves has not been carried through without connection to wider systems of domination and exploitation that operate in the world of globalised capitalism. For some, this amounts to what they call a 'green colonialism'. Guillaume Blanc, for instance, describes the creation of the Forillon natural park, at a time of great political agitation for national independence by Quebec nationalists. Parcs Canada created this reserve by expelling the inhabitants of the land and burning their houses in the name of preserving the pristine, atemporal and apolitical natural landscape in Canada (Blanc

[12] Le récit se déploie à deux voix, au fil des créations artistiques destinées à mettre en parallèle l'extériorité de la métaphysique traditionnelle et la « pensée sauvage » lovée au cœur de l'Occident, évoquant la façon dont les sociétés amazoniennes vivent avec la forêt, l'importance des chamans, etc. : un monde où humains et non-humains feraient partie d'une même « *totalité cosmologique* » et seraient associés dans une même « *économie des métamorphoses* ». Mais la forme du livre, et en particulier l'esthétique des photos, nourrit l'impression que le leader indigène ne fait que restituer le discours primitiviste que toute association environnementaliste attendrait de lui ; la matérialité terrestre de la forêt posséderait ainsi un « *souffle vital* » que les « *Blancs* » n'ont jamais pu percevoir. Défendre les arbres devient par là même une cause politique globale : celle des communautés indigènes assimilées à l'authenticité de la nature et menacées par une prédation capitaliste qui n'est toutefois jamais nommée comme telle. (Poupeau 2020)

2020; Hiribarren 2020). While these compulsory evictions may have stopped in Canada, and while the preservation of a traditional way of life and agriculture rather than the conservation of natural wilderness is encouraged in the Cévennes national park in France , which takes the area's human settlements as its core focus, with the backing of UNESCO who have included it amongst the world heritage sites, the same has not been the case in other parts of the world, especially in Africa and South America. Blanc cites the case of the natural reserve in the Simien mountains in Ethiopia, (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/9/, accessed 23.20.2020), which was classified as a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1978, then delisted from 1996 to 2016, until the Ethiopian government agreed to expel 2,500 of the farmer-herdsmen who had been living in the park. This is the model that is fostered by international bodies like UNESCO, WWF (World Wildlife Fund), IUCN (International Union for the Conservancy of Nature) in the nature reserves that have been established from the 20th century across Africa, such as Arusha in Tanzania, Kruger in South Africa and elsewhere, involving mass expulsions of farmers and herds people, or restrictions on how they make their livelihoods. According to Blanc, this amounts to naturalising Africa by force, or, in other words, 'dehumanising' a part of the continent.

This approach to nature owes much to the activities, policies and attitudes that were developed in the colonial period, when the hunting of animals for sport was practised by the colonisers and conceived as a noble activity, in sharp distinction from the hunting of animals for food and livelihood by local Africans, referred to pejoratively as 'poachers' (MacKenzie 1997). Blanc traces the career paths of many a colonial administrator who became a conservation expert in the wake of decolonisation and independence, promoting a policy which largely prioritises a natural environment devoid of human beings, who are discouraged from pursuing their traditional livelihood practices, rather than encouraging the cooperation of local communities in pursuance of their chosen way of life and in harmony with nature. Increasingly, lip service may be paid to these cooperative conservation goals. However, there remains some way to go in putting these into practice, one of the main obstacles being what has been described elsewhere as a hierarchy of knowledge, with local knowledge and practices devalued and ignored, and all value given to the views of international

experts, profoundly imbued with colonial perceptions of the pernicious effects of local human activity on the natural African world.

There are a number of campaigns and charitable organisations urging people to help 'save' the rainforests by buying up vast tracts of land to preserve them from development, for instance, the World Land Trust (https://www.worldlandtrust.org/appeals/buy-an-acre, accessed 17.8.2021), the Rainforest Trust (https://www.rainforesttrust.org/ , accessed 17.8.2021) and many others, as well as a number of very rich individuals with varied motives.

While, in some cases, the overriding motive may well be to protect the environment and the diversity of natural species and other resources for the benefit of humanity as a whole, the rights of local people to pursue their livelihoods also have to be given due weight, whether they live in natural reserves designated as such by national or international bodies or in other territories. Capitalism as a world system is built on the need to draw on natural resources essential to its operations and so far little has stood in the way of this extraction. Even the lip-service paid to the need to protect nature in nature parks and reserves cedes before the needs of the balance-sheet. Nature reserves in Africa, for instance, are increasingly being targeted for new drilling for oil and gas, including by fracking, as a result of the lower costs of the operations in these areas compared with off-shore drilling and extraction (Misser 2021).

The fishing industry may also be seen as a prime illustration of the contradictions of capitalism. The consumer demand for fish and seafood has doubled since the 1960s. This has led to more than 80% of seafood stocks being wiped out, resulting in the fishing industry's solution of fish farming, which is also supposed to be responsible for protecting natural wild species. Nowadays, the proportion of farmed fish eaten by consumers has risen to approximately half the total. China has become the world's biggest supplier of farmed fish and the USA imports 80% of their fish, mainly from China.

There are some advantages to this practice. These include, most notably, the avoidance of the fishing of unwanted species that are then discarded

and the provision, at low relative cost, of a source of protein, resulting in low carbon emissions. However, these are outweighed by the way in which the farmed fish are fed, essentially with fish meal largely obtained and processed by large-scale and usually indiscriminate industrial fishing of wild species. In this way, the fish-farming industry makes use of many times more wild fish than it produces as farmed fish, thus depleting natural stocks even further (Urbina 2021).

Humans and the Natural World

At a time when humanity's future on this planet is threatened, it is not only the destruction of the environment and the undermining of the conditions essential to human life, it is the more general question of the relation of humans to the rest of the natural world that increasingly comes to the fore. In a recent discussion of Karl Kraus and Rosa Luxemburg views on the relation between humans and animals, Jacques Bouveresse contrasts a view of nature based on notions of struggle, survival of the fittest, the domination of the weak by the strong, the subjection of the inferior to the superior, on the one hand, to one based on cooperation, mutuality, consideration for others, not just humans but different species too (Bouveresse 2020).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the key figures in attempts to define the fundamental relationship between humans and nature. In his works such as the *Social Contract* (1762), *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality amongst Humanity* (1755), he sought to discover the distinction between what was artificial in humans and a 'natural' state.

The question of the 'noble savage' is an appealing one to many. It plays a role in the idealisation of the 'indigenous' and the 'primitive', which can be more attractive than the classification of some peoples as 'uncivilised' and 'brutish'. However, when it comes to safeguarding the natural world, there is very often a mismatch between the actual way of life and the different forms of economic interaction with their environment that these so-called 'indigenous' peoples engage in. Modern ecological thinking may run contrary to how small farmers, and the so-called 'indigenous' peoples of the 'South', make their livelihood from the land. According to Poupeau, the

interests of the poor, fetishized as 'indigenous' and thus part of nature, may be at odds with an aesthetic elitism of a privileged group of people, who are working out how to survive in a damaged planet. The question of capitalism and the challenges to it are at the heart of this (Poupeau 2020).

This is not a new phenomenon. The history of the development of capitalism has shown how, over the centuries, the 'common' people have been deprived of the right to interact autonomously with the natural world in order to make a living. In Britain, the withdrawal of traditional rights to the forests and the commons has been amply documented, as, for instance, by E.P. Thompson in *Whigs and Hunters*, his work on forests and the introduction of enclosures of common land in 18th century England (Thompson 1975). Karl Marx, himself, writing in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842, devoted one of his earliest published articles to the debate in the Rhineland Diet on the alleged theft of wood and other products from the forests by the impoverished peasantry (Marx 1842).

When Nemonte Nenquimo, co-founder of the Ceibo Alliance, speaks up for the rights of Indigenous peoples of the Amazon 'to protect what we love – our way of life, our rivers, the animals, our forests, life on Earth' (Nenquimo 2020), he also stresses that it is not the white man *per se* who is the problem. It is 'the white man who knows too little for the power that he wields, and the damage that he causes.' (Nenquimo 2020)

Certainly, the worldwide development of capitalist modernity in the guise of 'civilisation' contributed massively to the damage and destruction of the human and natural world. As Nenquimo says: 'You forced your civilisation upon us and now look where we are: global pandemic, climate crisis, species extinction and, driving it all, widespread spiritual poverty (Nenquimo 2020).

One could also add the material poverty that has arisen as a result of the processes of capitalist imperialism, the expropriation of resources, along with indebtedness and financial domination. This is based on a complex set of relations that goes beyond a supposed binary divide between the 'Indigenous' and the 'white man'.

Chapter 1
Ideas of Progress – Historical Perspectives

So many discussions or dismissals of the idea of progress tend to assume that it has its origins in the European Enlightenment. This is certainly the starting point for many of those who pour scorn on the 'myth of progress'. However, the origins of the idea cannot be so readily assumed.

There is no question that the idea of progress existed in a number of different forms before the modern period and also in many different societies outside Europe. It could take the form of how the family, tribe or community could be made stronger through various rules on who could marry whom, in order to improve the breeding stock. It could also be related to the notion of self-improvement, in terms of increasing the power, value or moral standing of the human individual, as in the case of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, seeking to emulate and challenge the power of the gods. In Greek philosophy, the notion was not limited to the individual thinker striving to improve knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as the logical processes of thinking itself. It also had a collective aspect, illustrated perhaps most clearly in Plato's idealised Republic, an early Utopian vision of how society could be better ordered (Mukherjee 2017).

Other conceptions of progress are closely embedded in many of the world's religions, most of which posit an ideal to be aspired to. In Judaism, the laws set out in the Old Testament of the Bible to enable people to work towards a better form of social organisation in both their human relations and their relation to their notion of God, the mission given to the Jewish people and the messianic tradition heralding the coming of a saviour, all of these are underpinned by the notion of progress. In Hinduism, progress may be achieved in a number of ways: through devotional activity, prayer, living a good life or moving to a higher realm of being through the process of reincarnation. Buddhism in its many variants concentrates on improving the self and the way the individual understands and relates to the world. Christianity concentrates on individual salvation, although it may differ in

its different strands as to the way in which this salvation, or progress to a better world beyond this mortal coil, may be achieved – whether through faith, works or predestination. The focus of Islam is also on a better world, a world of 'peace', which, again, the faithful must strive to attain through their beliefs and actions.

What is clear about these religions, and indeed many others that have not been mentioned here, is the belief in progress that unites them and its validity as an ideal towards which human beings should strive, even if the forms in which it is expressed and the ideals which it proffers differ widely from each other. Indeed, new religions themselves often come into being with the precise aim of improving on those that have come before.

These ideas do not develop in a vacuum. They are usually closely related to the geo-political tensions and social clashes between different groups with their own aims and objectives, their own privileges to maintain and the perceptions of injustice to challenge. Thus we see the growth and power of Hindu nationalism, the various forms of political Islamism, the massive rise of Protestant Evangelism across the globe, as an expression of faith in the values of capitalism and the propagation of social conservatism (Belkaïd & Oualalou 2020). Some of these movements are built on the idea that things were better before, that a return to the fundamentals is required. To a great extent, these new religious movements hark back to a golden age before modernity and secularism held sway.

A belief in the possibility, or impossibility, of progress is not, however, limited to the proponents of the different religions. Moreover, some have disputed the possibility of meaningful progress within the confines of religious belief. The Swedish philosopher, Martin Hägglund, argues that a belief in the divine and the possibility of eternal life takes away all meaning from the present life on earth, resulting in 'a devaluation of our finite lives as a lower form of being' (quoted in Burkeman 2019:16). Hägglund claims that it is 'secular faith' that can give our lives meaning. This may be another way of describing the type of responsible humanism that is dealt with elsewhere.