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What, if anything, might we mean by "progressive" politics today?

What is "progress" in the day-to-day use of the term? Someone makes progress in recovering from an illness or in preparing for an exam. A company makes progress in increasing its market share, and new computer software marks progress over its predecessor. Or progress occurs in some military action towards defeating enemy forces. Such trivialized uses of the term are ubiquitous and equivalent to the notion of "agents attaining their goals", whatever the chosen goals, and the steps taken, and by whom, may be. This foggy and over-extended use of the term "progress" is entirely unhelpful in political contexts.

I.

Instead, the political discourse of progress bundles three core ideas. (cf. Sztompka 1990) First, progress is the outcome of *collective intentional* effort driven by *reason*. Some supra-individual social entity whose members refer to itself as "we" are united in they want and try to achieve it through some coordinated effort. That is to say, progress is *not* the evolutionary outcome of the blind forces of change driven by the market, technical change, or encompassing societal "rationalization" (Weber). In contrast, evolutionist views of social change - be they sociological modernization theories or doctrines of the "objective laws of motion" of capitalism (Kautsky) - leave at best limited space for the category of progress, thus understood. In contrast to evolutionist views of change, "progressive" perspectives see change as voluntaristically driven by social forces and agents; the political efforts of which result in *legislation* and the free exchange of arguments and expression of interests from which it emerges. Progress, in this view, is the declaration of *rights* and the effective enforcement of such rights which authorize public policies and programs. Progressive lawmakers and the social forces supporting them think about society in terms of a difference - the difference between conditions as they *are* and conditions as they *should* and *can* become through transformative political efforts. It follows that progress takes place in a *state* - or supranational regimes endowed with legitimate power - and due to the state's capacity to make and implement its laws. (This implies that weakness or deficiency of a state's capacity to make and enforce laws can severely preclude the very possibility of progress in whichever of its meanings.)

Second, progress consists in the *liberation* (or "emancipation") of collectivities (e. g., citizens, classes, nations, minorities, income categories, even mankind), be it the liberation *from* want, ignorance, exploitative power relations, and fear or the freedom of such collectives *to* govern

themselves autonomously, i.e., without being dependent upon or controlled by others. Furthermore, the freedom that results from liberation applies *equally to all*, with equality serving as a criterion to make sure that liberation does not in fact become a mere privilege of particular social categories. To that end, the *equality* of the opportunity to enjoy freedom is just a means to enforce and *universalize* liberty. Equality is valuable because - and to the extent that - inequalities can interfere with the liberty (the liberty to pursue well-considered life plans, that is) of those who find themselves in an inferior distributional position. Egalitarians want to provide *all* people with the means and conditions that they need to achieve freedom. Hence equality of rights and "real" equality of opportunity is not a goal in itself, much less a rival of liberty, but a mode of granting and achieving liberty (which otherwise would degenerate into privilege). (Given this association of the ideal of liberty with universalism, i.e. the notion of not just "real" but also "equal" freedom, it is odd - and an intended oxymoronic provocation - that an electorally quite successful Norwegian political party - as well as a former sister party in Denmark - has chosen to name itself "Progress Party". For this party combines in its populist program libertarian anti-tax demands with xenophobic anti-immigrant positions, thus on both counts providing us with an extreme version of liberty-as-privilege.)

Third, progressive change is essentially *contested*. The typical configuration of forces is that progressive change is opposed by those who are averse to it ("conservatives") as well as by those who actively try to reverse previous change ("reactionaries"). Progress is *costly* and involves *social conflict* between the proponents of progress and those who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they will have to bear its costs. (Shils 1981) Hence reactionary opponents of liberating progressive change have resorted to demonizing it as a destructive, counter-productive, fateful force that threatens to undermine tradition, social order, or even the interests ("rightly understood") of those who advocate progress. (Hirschman 1991) Progress will be made only to the extent that those conflicts can be overcome, be it through the use of revolutionary methods or be it through democratic institutions and deliberative procedures, and eventually settled and reconciled.

II.

The idea of progress is a modern and secular one, virtually unknown prior to the 18th century. Before that, we had utopian visions, on the one hand, and on the other the idea that the Christian God will save our souls as well as the world according to His plan that is beyond human insight, reason, agency, and intent.

The recent revival of the discourse of social, economic and political progress (cf. Cramme and Jaroba 2009) emerges from the widely appreciated fact that the almost universally accepted and

institutionalized yardsticks of progress and the approximation of a "good" society, as they have been established in the second half of the 20th century, have become subject to three interrelated kinds of *doubt*. First, at least some of these standards are seen to be plainly misguided and normatively invalid because the costs and unanticipated consequences involved in their realization affect even those who are the presumed beneficiaries of progress, not just its enemies. Progress can involve costs which, at least in retrospect, put its desirability in question. (Bloch 1956) Some notions of progress have clearly been rendered obsolete, at least profoundly controversial. The development of and reliance on nuclear energy for civilian use is a case in point. Thus the first dilemma of progress is that we do things in spite of some evidence that the consequences of doing them may well turn out, in anticipated future retrospect, *to be undesirable and detrimental in normative terms*. If that happens, we do things that we cannot do in good conscience, i. e. in a full and unbiased appraisal of the risks involved.

Second and reciprocally, we also *fail to do things that we might, even must do in good conscience*. To the extent standards of progress can be defended as normatively valid (i. e., "worth" the costs and efforts), societies and their institutional systems grossly fail to enforce them and to live up to those standards. We *fail* to do things that we are both able to do and that we routinely invoke as *being highly desirable and beneficial in normative terms*. The eradication of diseases, hunger, and extreme poverty are obvious examples. In these and analogous cases, failures of initiative and enforcement occur while mere lip service is being paid to progressive objectives. Yet such standards are often being betrayed or compromised even by the progressive forces that (claim to) act in their name. Third, trapped in these two contradictions (which are mirror images of each other) people in modernized societies of the OECD world have largely abandoned (and often turned cynical about) the notion of progress itself, i.e. the difference between conditions as they are and some (assumedly collectively preferable) conditions as they could and should be created through political reform. The notion of progress is being dismissed by contemporary mainstream political forces as no longer relevant to politics. Yet a sense of *difference*, the thought that "a different world is possible", is constitutive for the forces of both political liberalism and socialism. In fact, the very idea of democracy would be rendered rather pointless if such difference between conditions as they are and collectively more desirable conditions as they might be created were to be radically denied. Today, progress, as premised upon such difference, appears to have largely yielded to a post-modern sense of *indifference* and fatalism, a view according to which, as things cannot be changed anyway due to complexity, interdependence, short-sightedness, and the failure to solve collective action problems, and as progressive proclamations are seen as empty rhetoric anyway, we have to accept conditions as they are, and history has come to an end.

That, at least, is the perspective by which much of contemporary policy-making seems to be inspired. It is focused not on achieving what "we" hope for, but on managing manifest disasters and averting catastrophic developments and corresponding fears. Banks must be bailed out, car companies and department store chains rescued, regions salvaged from ecological disasters, and entire countries and their fiscal and monetary systems saved from collapse. The measure of political integration that can no longer be achieved through governments' evident ability to "get things done", i. e. change them for the better; they must instead be accomplished through a politics of fear through which people are intimidated and led to believe that "there is no alternative" to granting free reign to whatever fire department (or military force, or central bank, or government) is held to be capable to intervene successfully. Fear in turn generates a pattern of depoliticized authoritarianism: As there is no alternative anyway, let the respective experts in disaster control come in and do their job - and stay out of their way, as the urgency of their tasks precludes the raising of normative concerns and objections anyway. This urgency is about to unhinge every mechanism of democratic accountability.

The questions that need to be raised are obvious. What is it that allegedly needs to be rescued? Is it really worth rescuing? Why have governments failed to prevent, through the adoption of alternative policies, the condition in which there seem to be "no alternative"? Who is to bear the direct costs and opportunity costs of bail-out operations? How can we make sure that the restoration of "normal" conditions will not amount to empowering "systemically relevant" actors to cause a next round of emergencies? Unless these issues are debated and answered in ways that are consistent with democratic standards, chances remain that we need rescue from mindless and futile rescue operations.

It is to this kind of questions to which progressive politics must respond. And it can only do so if it ceases to use an *arrow* (pointing towards the hopes for a "better future" that is contingent upon economic growth, employment, technological innovation, military control) and replaces it with a *stop sign* that specifies in normative term matters and conditions *that we already enjoy* and do not want to sacrifice under any circumstances for whatever benefit or return. It is common (though mostly tacit) knowledge that the generation that is entering adulthood in the first decade of the current century will *not* have better lives, in the simplest material terms, than their parents - arguably a deviation from a pattern that has been valid for two centuries. As a consequence, the very notion of progress seems to mutate into a conservative, even conservationist logic of *preventing regression*. According to this logic, which is often associated with the notion of *sustainability*, the emphasis shifts from "moving ahead" to "making sure that we do not slide back".

Let me now elaborate on all three of the points I made before: the cost of progress, the hypocrisy of value commitments, and the political cynicism and fatalism that is the joint outcome of both.

(1) The end of state socialism has demonstrated beyond any doubt that some putative progressive strategies can in fact turn out to be regressive in its result - and to an extent so that makes "progress" no longer worth its costs. Intoxicated by their own ideology of progress, state socialist regimes turned out to be incapable to perceive and cope with its own looming disasters. Supposedly progressive strategies can place burdens and constraints on members of society which, in the name and for the sake of some *future* (and, at that, often illusory) liberation, deprive them of their *present* rights and liberties. If such imbalance obtains, a "progressive" regime can become addicted to repression on which its survival is held to depend yet which, in fact, rather undermines the very conditions of its survival. The Berlin Wall and its eventual fall was a graphic illustration of this dialectics of repression. It seems unlikely that proponents of progressive policies are in danger of forgetting these lessons any time soon. Yet in capitalist democracies, a somewhat analogous mechanism of self-subversion can be observed. These societies have institutionalized an accounting frame of "costs" and "benefits" that is seriously defective in that it tends to extol quantifiable benefits of efficiency, growth, and competitiveness while leaving large categories of "qualitative" costs (ranging from the humiliation of workers to long term environmental damages) entirely unaccounted for. (Judt 2009) Some of the guiding principles underlying Western political economies - such as the yardsticks of technical "progress", efficiency, productivity, economic growth, and "security" - are arguably ill-considered in the first place. The assumption that the further development of the "forces of production" is axiomatically linked to progress, enhanced well-being, and liberation is hardly any longer in need of demolition. Rather, the burden of proof is on those who claim the existence of such link in any given case. In fact, it does not require deep analytical insights to understand that allegedly beneficial economic growth as we know it does not automatically lead to enhanced *well-being* and that, even to the extent it may, it does not lead to *sustainable* well-being. (Stiglitz et al. 2009; Jackson 2009) The prevailing obsession with efficiency results in the paradoxical pattern of cutting costs *whatever it may cost* in terms of "non-economic" negative externalities which are "factored out" by our established accounting frames for measuring "progress". Democratic capitalism depends upon economic growth in the same way as state socialism depends on repression. Growth, as repression, is as much the precondition of short term stability as it is unsustainable, even self-subversive, in the long run. Yet the use of this distorted and biased frame of self-observation may well amount to a critical cognitive deficit concerning the subversion of stability.

(2) More acute is perhaps the second doubt about progress. While progressive standards of equal liberty (which include the institutions of the rule of law, human rights, liberal democracy, international peace, and social protection) are widely endorsed and proclaimed throughout (not just) the developed world, we often turn out to be entirely unable to enforce and redeem these routinely proclaimed normative standards. This is arguably not just a matter of some weakness of will of human agents, but also one rooted in inherent structural weaknesses of liberal democracies, such as the limited temporal scope of elites and non-elites alike. It is also rooted in deficiencies of state capacity, i. e. the constrained capacity of democratic states to tax and to regulate. The progressive normative framework of liberal democracies is well entrenched at the level of proclamations and aspirations, yet in reality it suffers from a huge credibility gap. In Germany, 15 per cent of children grow up under conditions of poverty. About the same percentage of mankind (i.e., one billion people) suffers from hunger or severe malnutrition, solemnly proclaimed UN millennium goals notwithstanding. A tiny minority of financial market actors cannot be stopped from inflicting severe damage on the global economy while hijacking major parts of national budgets in the process. Each year, many thousands of people, in Africa and elsewhere, die from diseases that can easily and cheaply be prevented. African "boat people" drown by the hundreds every year while trying to make their way to Europe across the Mediterranean. In the meantime, wars are waged at stupendous costs that are evidently as unwinnable as they are illegal by standards of international law. Considerations of human rights are suspended, in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere, once they appear to be in conflict with the imperatives of a "war on terror". Established modes of the production and consumption of wealth threaten climate and ecosystems on a scale that borders on a design for the self-decimation of mankind. Chernobyl and New Orleans are names that remind us of self-inflicted disasters of commission and omission. And so on.

My entirely unoriginal point here is that none of these events and conditions can be defended and justified by reference to the norms we still (virtually) all endorse. For instance, it is probably not easy to find a reasonably civilized person who would be willing to advance a consistent argument *against* the idea that equality of opportunity is a morally good thing to have. Yet a closer look at our educational institutions with their strong patterns of status inheritance reveals that many people are actually deprived of the opportunity to participate in the equal opportunity game (just think of children of migrants who often lack the opportunity to acquire the language skills at an early age on which scholastic success so critically depends). The norms and principles that *are* valid and universally accepted as such do not apply in practical terms.

(3) Both the experience that presumed progress can turn out, in the light of (all of) its costs, not to be worth the effort and the experience that efforts that might well lead to progressive accomplishments are not being made contribute to the popularity of a third critique of progressive politics. It is based on the doubt whether a "different world" is *at all* possible, a doubt that gives rise to privatist and fatalistic indifference. The blatant conflict between norms we all *share* (or at least feel compelled to pay lip-service to) and things we all fail to *do* leads many into plain cynicism, and a deep disbelief in the possibility of politics, let alone progressive politics. We cannot afford to live in accordance with even the most basic of our political principles and moral insights because more urgent matters (such as economic growth and the priority to restore it) have to be taken care of first. As a consequence, we have become used to living with the reality of ongoing moral scandals, hypocrisy, and embarrassment. Moreover, we have become used to massive policy irrationalities of the following intertemporal sort: On the one hand, we know that solutions will grow prohibitively more costly unless we start to apply preventive remedies *now*, yet on the other hand we *need more time*, due to current priorities and resources, before we can start doing so. (cf. Stern 2006) This reality of seemingly insurmountable embarrassments and irrationalities cannot but breed cynicism and attitudes of post-modernist indifference and widespread disaffection with political life.

III.

Our societies are evidently largely incapable of avoiding (or effectively coping with) self-inflicted moral and physical disasters and self-destructive crises. The political and philosophical elites of slave-holding societies (or, for that matter, the executioners of Stalinist modernization) may well have lived in perfect harmony with their own normative premises (i. e., they did what they believed in and believed in what they did, repugnant as these beliefs are from our present enlightened point of view). Such consistency is not something we are able to enjoy. Yet rather than turning to indifference, the progressive alternative, in fact the only adequate conception of progress in the present condition, is to *strengthen our collective capacity for disaster control* and *the prevention of civilizational relapses*. We do not need more progress, but we need to cope in better ways with the consequences of the (alleged) progress we have made already. That is to say, we do not need *new* values, visions, or principles - such as revolutionary theorists of former times were busy spelling out. All we need, as progressives, is to dare to take ourselves seriously and build conditions under which we can do so.

Today, an institutional design for social and political progress is no master plan or encompassing blueprint (such as "socialism", which appears to have become a virtually empty phrase if we look at what all kinds of self-described socialist mean by it). Encompassing blueprints concerning the buildup of a just society are neither available nor even desirable, as Armatya Sen (2009) has argued in his critique of Rawlsian "transcendental institutionalism". "Progressive" is rather whatever it takes to make modern societies, regression-prone as they are, less defenseless against their self-inflicted catastrophes and moral scandals. Evidence has been accumulating that such defense mechanisms do not flourish under conditions that neoliberal economists advocate. The reason is simple: Markets do quite wonderful things, but they do most certainly not cultivate the much-needed capacity of human agents for other-regardingness ("solidarity") and future-regardingness (or solidarity with our future selves). (Lukes 2005) The fact is that they eradicate either of them.

In order to strengthen the practice of these two virtues, progressives will, first of all, have to come to terms with the oxymoronic insight that the last thing we need is more progress -- progress, that is, along the conventional objectives of economic growth, productivist accomplishments, "full" employment, consumerism, and privatization of the economy as well as of our individual lives. (Fitzpatrick 2004, Goodin 2001) To be sure, economic growth is - and has long been - the universal peace formula of the capitalist economy and civilization, as in its absence neither investors would invest nor workers would content themselves with the discipline of the workplace and the rewards consumerism has to offer. What progressives need instead is to think about are *defensive* mechanisms that are called for in order to cope with some of the disastrous consequences of "progress". Given the prevailing tendency of our type of civilization to slide back into partial barbarism (Offe 1996) and to subvert its own viability through causing moral as well as physical catastrophes, the question is: How can we make social and economic processes reasonably "regression-proof" -- and thereby sustainable? Albert Hirschman (1993) speaks of the need to "solidify" past progress, to preserve its "robustness and meaning". No doubt, this is a defensive, not to say conservative stance to take. Yet it demands more than just thinking about a "green technology" that supposedly will inaugurate a "third industrial revolution", as some Greenish protagonists of German Social Democracy have reconciled themselves to believe. It will also involve thinking about designs for mutually constraining roles for states, supranational organizations, and corporations, about new cultural patterns of consumption, mobility, family life, and about the distribution of capabilities, social security, and caring activities.

IV.

Again, it is entirely unoriginal to make one prediction. The political agenda of the 21st century will be dominated by three tightly interwoven systemic challenges: Energy, security, climate. None of these challenges can be conceivably coped with through more economic growth and more employment -- quite to the contrary. Hence we need to think about, experiment with, and advocate institutional patterns by which we can better cope with our self-inflicted risks and dangers. For that, again, no holistic blueprint of a "good", "well-ordered" or "post-revolutionary" society is presently available. If progressives make progress in redefining "progress", it is most likely to come in the form of sectoral and piecemeal innovations, the implementation of which will allow us, if all goes well, to bridge the gulf that exists between our current realities and the normative claims of the liberal and socialist traditions. (Incidentally, many authors have been puzzled recently by the question why it is exactly at the time when global capitalism underwent its most serious crisis since the Second World War that also, at least in Europe, Social Democrats faced their sharpest decline. Perhaps part of the answer might be that Social Democrats have come to fully embrace a notion of progress that the economic crisis and its aftermath have so profoundly discredited.)

The revised notion of progress that I am trying to explore here is no longer captured by the metaphor of "marching forward". To the contrary, the appropriate metaphor is that of establishing effective stop signs and thus protecting ourselves individually, as well as society as a whole, against the tendency of "sliding back" that results from the wrong kind of marching forward. Much of the current controversies on social and labor market policy is framed by defensive concerns, with progressives asking: How can rights, as well as adequate real incomes, of employees, pensioners etc. be *defended* against the onslaught of European and global neo-liberal forces? The two types of movement contrasted here - "marching forward" *vs.* stopping and preventing disasters - differ in the sociological nature of their respective dynamic. While representative political *elites*, together with their technocratic advisors and administrative staff, can pose as leaders on the march of progress and pride themselves of the achieving, or rather trying to achieve, quantitatively measurable cumulative results (such as growth rates, jobs, the balancing of current accounts, or even the equalization of incomes), the issue of what needs to be *avoided* and *prevented* must be settled by including the level of *ordinary citizens* and their perception and understanding of the dark underside of progress. A "good" society is not to be defined by a new and utopian set of principles, institutions, and visions; it is rather to be designed by its members well-founded confidence that "X" can*not* happen - with X being a major individual or collective disaster or injustice that social and political actors have either inadvertently caused or failed to prevent (although it *is* in fact preventable). Such a society is one that is equipped with adequate "shock absorbers", stop signs, and brakes, thus becoming able to defend itself against the social

and physical consequences of its own mode of operation. Historically, attempts to set up progressive stop signs have been carried out by social movements and their protest activities: anti-war, anti-discrimination, feminist, urban, ecological, anti-imperialist, anti-nuclear energy mobilizations are cases in point. The current supranational negative goal of *avoiding* or slowing down climate change is another example.

Still another one is the widely perceived obsolescence of the overarching policy goal of "full employment". As this goal either manifestly cannot be achieved in the political economies of the OECD world (or, if achieved, only under conditions that must be considered inacceptable in terms of income, security, working conditions, and work-life balance), the "defensive" answer is the demand for economic citizenship rights, the partial uncoupling of employment and income, and even the adoption of a scheme that provides for an unconditional basic income for all citizens (or even long term residents) of a country, designed to avoid the condition of social and economic precariousness and exclusion. (van Parijs 1995) A slogan such as "freedom instead of full employment", as it has been used by activists advocating economic rights of citizenship in Germany, indicates the shift of perspective: from a "positive" demand for something to be achieved ("full" employment) to a "negative" demand designed to protect those who otherwise are most severely affected (through long term unemployment and its individual as well as collective implications) by the failure to achieve the positive goal of stable labor market integration. The preventive policy perspective is focused on precluding the incidence of "worst cases" by building robust and durable *floors* of security. This perspective is clearly in conflict with outcome-egalitarian perspectives. For it claims that individual outcomes may well be, and legitimately so, as unequal as they happen to be -- as long, that is, as nobody ends up below some adequately defined floor. Some social democratic parties still promise their electoral clientele to universalize upward social mobility. It would be more in line with the current argument if they were to promise that nobody should be left behind and excluded. (But that is probably not an advice that campaign consultants would tend to give, as, presumably, campaigns are won by catering to specific hopes through promises rather than to fears and warnings.)

In order to capture the difference that I wish to emphasize, let me use the metaphorical distinction between "gross progress" and "net progress". "Gross progress" is a quantitative measure of economic performance, leaving all kinds of negative externalities as well as wasteful and unsustainable aspects of the process unaccounted for. In contrast the notion of "net progress" is a qualitative measure of the increment of liberation and the enhancement of well-being that results from the process in question. The distinction between the two leaves open the logical possibility that a plus in "gross progress" involves a *minus* in "net progress", which is to say: an actual de-

crease of well-being and autonomy. Yet as we do not have an unequivocal and consensual metric that would allow for the quantitative measurement of "net progress", we are left with the need to assess the negative side effects and long term externalities of "gross progress" in qualitative terms. Nevertheless, we may conclude that the ambitions of progressive politics are the better fulfilled the more reliably these negative side effects can be controlled and eliminated.

To be sure, there is no objective measure by which we can determine the gap between "gross progress" (such as GDP per capita) and "net progress" (such as changes in the level of some notion of "well-being"). As this is so, two simple rules of justice suggest themselves. First, the question of how much (and what kind of) economic growth must be sacrificed for the sake of protecting and enhancing levels of well-being must be settled, in the absence of uncontested quantitative yardsticks, through *deliberative* procedures. What we cannot optimize by means of calculation must be decided through methods of informed collective will formation (which, however, it would be naïve to assume to result in consensus.) Second, those categories of people who are most likely to be affected by the negative externalities of "gross progress" (be it peasant in the southern hemisphere, be it the long term unemployed in rich OECD countries) must be given priority in compensating for the most severe of these externalities in ways that enable them to cope with the remaining ones.

Progress, as conceptualized here, consists in the increased capacity of societies and polities to control those *costs* (in a very broad sense) resulting from the pursuit of progress, as conventionally understood and practiced. Such a switch to a *preventive* notion of progress calls for a critical reflection on the question to what extent some *sacrifice* in terms of "gross progress" will add to "my" (or rather "our") "net progress". How much of the costs of conventional "gross" progress can we save without inflicting upon ourselves inacceptable losses in terms of "net" progress? And how can we improve the trade-off so as to make what we know is the normatively "right" choice actually affordable?

To illustrate: The mobility regime of most modern societies is based upon highways, automobiles, and carbon fuels. We know that this mobility regime is unsustainable for its ecological and climate-related externalities. Yet the choice between living according to this mobility regime and resisting it (by walking, using a bike, minimizing mobility, etc.) is not really a choice for most people most of the time, as they depend on commuting to the (typically distant) places where they must work, study, shop, etc. In this situation, the building of an efficient system of public transport is a genuinely progressive ("liberating") change, as it now provides people with the *acceptable* choice of using other means of transportation than their private cars. They are now free to practice *responsible* mobility. Yet *politicians* may not be free in the first place to open up

that choice through putting in place a public transport system that is both technically and economically competitive with the conventional mobility regime. This unfreedom may be jointly due to the facts that they (a) lack the budgetary resources needed to build and operate the public transport system and that they (b) have reasons to fear that, in case most people were to switch to public transport for most of their mobility needs, this would involve a (from their perspective, categorically unacceptable) loss of jobs in the car industry. We might summarize this sad story by saying: It is politically unaffordable to make choice affordable to citizens -- a choice, that is, in favor of a widely shared notion of "net progress".

Needless to say, people differ in their awareness and appreciation of what the undesirable side-effects and long-term externalities of the dynamics of (the conventional understanding of) progress are. What is to be avoided with the highest priority - and can be avoided and prevented under acceptable terms - is far from self-evident or consensual. There are so many adverse features, risks, moral embarrassments, and unsustainable implications in the day-to-day operation of capitalist democracies that any intellectual ambition would seem hopeless to single out one "dominant" contradiction or crisis tendency. The first step of any progressive politics (not of political parties, but more likely of social and political movements and civil society actors) is to sensitize people for the regressive potential inherent in the social, political, and economic arrangements under which we live. The second step is to persuade them that cynical acquiescence and indifference is not a viable option as it hinders us to take ourselves seriously.

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