

“On Progress”
With Professor Stewart Orwell Teric III

3/12/19

The following is the first draft of a text (with one important plot detail updated) around which the performance was subsequently loosely improvised.

A podium with a decorative potted plant, a white board behind.

Enter Professor Stewart-Orwell Teric III (it's me in Young Vaping Academic drag, holding enormous book “Sociology of Philosophy”). Bowtie, snazzy jacket, etc.)

Sorry, sorry class – just have to finish this text to Judy – and send – oh, to Judith Butler I mean, she just gets so cranky when she doesn't hear from me –

So (sighs, stares into distance lost in thought) Yes, I'm pleased to see that some of you have brought along your copies of the combined *Progress Through The Ages: Plato to Wittgenstein: The Search for Epistemic Surety (Vol 1) and Vol 2: Nietzsche to Žižek, The Neoliberal Quest for intellectual and Economic Enlightenment in the Decline of the Late Capitalistic Era*, I know it's a tome but it's worth it to have on you as reference especially now as we work cautiously through this difficult material – when I was in school I always had a dog eared copy in my bag and I recommend you do the same (*wink at someone*).

So (sighs, stares into distance lost in thought) let's dive right in, shall we?

(Writes) What. Is. Progress. (*underlines progress*) Anyone want to start us out with a guess? (*regardless of response, better if actively ignoring comments or hands, continues.*) No? No one? Well progress (sighs, stares into distance lost in thought) is an old idea, and for our purposes we can start with Aristotle and the idea of teleology, which as we will surely remember is the final of his four causes: Matter, Form, Agent, and End, which we can also understand as Purpose. The purpose of a thing, as Aristotle says, is in the thing's teleological end; a seed wants to be a plant, a ball at the top of a hill wants to rest at the bottom, a boat wants to (*sighs, stares into distance lost in thought, then, wistfully*) a boat wants to sail. The thing progresses to its natural and intended end. Now there are obvious critiques we could bring up with this theory – natural or intended according to whom? What does it mean for a thing to “want?” But the take away from this first of our theories of progress is that it is intended, that it is predictable, and, if we are to look to Aristotle's Poetics at all, seeing his model of theatre and its trajectory through exposition, rising action, conflict, falling action, and denouement, it is a linear, forward marching progress.

Moving now to the classical model of progress in science and economics, as established *vis a vis* the Enlightenment, we see certain similarities to the Aristotelian teleological structure of progress, though with some differences. Notice here, as a simple mathematical function, the rate

of change as it increases demonstrates progress; and what are the factors in this equation? Anyone? *Money.*

Now let's talk about money, or let's talk about *Kapital*. (*Starting to get turned on.*) Now to talk about Marx, of course you have to talk about Hegel, – can anyone tell me why? No? Nobody? Well Hegel, though this is a gross oversimplification to the point really of misrepresentation, produced a theory that is often represented as the relation between a thesis, and antithesis, and the resultant synthesis that is called – anyone? No? No one? Called – the “dialectic.” He proposed that there was a spirit – a “geist” – that pushed the churning forward and it's this of course that Marx would turn on its head in his theory of dialectical materialism.

The four stages – not including the Asiatic mode of course, form a very progressive theory for the time, and important because it brings the concept of progress into a very tangible, materialist, class-based realm,

Actor accidentally knocks the potted plant off the podium on “materialism,” but ignores/ calls for a clean up. A pre-taped projection of the actor teaching the rest of the course flickers on over top of the white board upstage. The actor matches/ mirrors the lecture at first in a kind of refraction.

– yes, a class-based realm, but note that it still assumes an upward or forward trajectory, regardless.

The video loops over itself but offset so that visual echoes appear as it continues.

(*More excited.*) Now I want to talk to you about someone near and dear to my heart: Lawrence S. Rockefeller professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts institute of technology Dr. Thomas Kuhn. In his seminal work from 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, this man espoused a beautiful theory of progress. So far everything we've looked at has assumed a forward marching trajectory in which all knowledge leads to more knowledge. (*more and more animatedly again*) Kuhn is going to turn this assumption inside out, suggesting instead that progress occurs not as a slow and steady or even as a dialectical progression, but by sudden and occasional revolutionary movements that shift the paradigms of thought. And this model of course is evident in scientific and political history – Just look at evolution and at punctuated equilibrium for Christ's sake!

Actor sees the spilled plant, beat, approaches slowly. They sit with the plant, feel the dirt on their fingers, rub it on their face, and then try to gather the fine dirt with their fingers and the palms of their hands to put the plant back right. This lasts through the rest of the lecture. Only the projection remains animated/excited.

Birds don't slowly and steadily evolve into new versions of themselves, but they suddenly and drastically change when new factors are introduced! Or take, France, did France become a republic by careful, metered steps over time, or did it happen by revolution? Kuhn's model offers a meaningful differentiation between the idea of progress as being a forward action and progress

as being a revolutionary action. And it means that progress doesn't always have to be forward; sometimes the most progressive idea reinvents the wheel so to speak!

But why stop there? This is all just a western view of time and progress, there are whole civilizations that don't view time as linear at all! In less patriarchally dogmatic communities, time may be seen as cyclical! (*Projected professor is very turned on, drawing frantically on the projected whiteboard projected onto the actual whiteboard*). Or what if time is gyre-ical – Turning and turning in the widening gyre indeed!" Yeats was talking of the coming of end times but perhaps it was only the beginning – a way a lone a last a loved a long the / riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, and *this* was only to be a paradigm shift – or perhaps there is an end time after all – (*louder*) and perhaps there is no such thing as progress, or it's merely the continuance of entropy and the heat death of the universe (*and louder*) and maybe there really is no such thing as progress and we're all just Sisyphus, pushing our lonely boulders up a hill eternally, suffering alone, only to have them roll us back down again. And maybe if there is no– (*climaxing*)

All the looped and offset professor projections gather back to a single figure as the Professor gathers themselves, smooths hair, lights pipe, smokes it for way too long before beginning to talk. Resumes with demeanor as at top of lecture.

So that, in a nutshell, is progress. I'll expect papers on my desk by start of class next week.

Projection flickers off, light only on the figure downstage gluing together.

Beat.

Actor looks up at the audience.

Blackout.