

Paper for SASE 2019, May 3, 2019

Network L: Regulation and Governance

GOVERNANCE REFORMS AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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Keywords: social progress, social science, governance

Abstract:

Social science has a major task in today's world: there is a long list of major gains in the situation of human beings on a global scale, as measured against the Millennium Goals; but the UN (2019) does, however, also list serious problems that lie ahead. Challenges to the Environment, and to the systems of international transactions, especially, demand action on a global scale, as does the increasing social and economic inequality. New forms of governance are clearly required to meet these challenges, but the UN does not attempt to identify which organizational measures are necessary and possible in this respect. A major effort of social science is required to start the process of that identification.

Such an effort has been initiated by the International Panel of Social Progress. In its 2018 Report, the IPSP analyzes in depth the concept and situation of social progress – a broad term covering much of the agenda also for the global challenges – and then proceeds to outline in depth the possible ways ahead for progressing, the organizational forms and global/societal governance measures.

A Manifesto on Social Progress, published subsequently by five leading IPSP researchers, presents the overall picture in a readable, compressed manner, and discusses organizational forms for reaching social progress. This paper departs from the analyses in the Manifesto, and then tries to go further, attempting to identify the forces that work against social progress, against the governance and regulation formats that must be developed to enable social progress? Those forces - active and powerful regressive forces – can be identified by comparing some of the major developments in contemporary governance.

Using examples from countries around the globe, the paper shows how serious these regressive forces are, illustrates how they work, and points to mechanisms that make them emerge and grow. Moreover, the paper suggests a particular role for the social sciences in this context. A true social science cannot be nihilistic or passively compliant. It can and must point to myriads of organizational forms that have been employed to advance the situation of people in all sorts of societies. Social science has to be practical and normative – if not pointing the way, at least mapping the course.

The history of progress

“Progress” was a major call for arms in the time of the Enlightenment, and important philosophers like Diderot, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel and Marx accepted the idea that societies must move forward. To varying degrees, the forward movement was seen as an inevitable process, moving in a preordained direction, created by fundamental things in human life – or perhaps fundamental achievements like science and human freedom. If not inevitable, most philosophers saw it as a natural, perhaps necessary goal of human efforts. As human beings were accepted to be social, progress could only be *social progress*.

Social *science* was developed as a framework for analyzing the march forward, or for understanding the forces driving history. Even classical economics, with its assumptions of market clearing and the optimizing of prices and costs, rests on a notion of collective rationality emerging from individual rationality - inevitable progress. T.R. Malthus was one of the few voices that, even if he accepted Adam Smith’s fundamental notion of rational choice, ventured a skeptical view of human development. Most economists saw the long term development of the market economy as one leading towards greater wealth and higher incomes, even if cycles of boom and bust did occur. Theories of balances predicted that cyclical movements would neutralize themselves – Say’s law was one of the early examples, and other theories of general balance, or equilibrium, as economists call it, were ventured by Leon Walras and Alfred Marshall. Malthus saw history as mainly cyclical, with negative side effects neutralizing positive developments. Most later theorists assumed that the equilibria, whether partial or general, were stages on the general road to rising productivity and wealth¹.

In the twentieth century, the social disasters of dictatorships, imperialism, and large-scale wars undermined the “progressive” view of the social sciences. An automatically progressive societal development looked much less evident. Social science had two choices – to either go for science or for social: *science* means giving up the ideals of the Enlightenment and strive for some sort of “objective” science, without a given direction or result in mind; *social* means turning instrumental and work towards delivering the tools for actors who took it upon themselves to re-start progress.

In the mid-twentieth century, there was a wave of interest in the “science” aspect: a neutral, supposedly value-free modelling of the social effects of individual choices in economics, politics and sociology. The Cold War, however, challenged the notion of generalized social science, valid for all types of societies. Despite the explicit adherence to the objectivity and neutrality of science, several attempts were made to portray Capitalism as a rational and natural system, and Liberal Democracy as the pinnacle of human evolution (Almond & Verba, 1963; Fukuyama, 1992; Rostow, 1960). The rebuilding of most of the world after the destructions caused by imperialism and World Wars, called for analytical tools that could be applied for economic growth, political stability and social stability.

¹ David Wallace-Wells suggests an unpleasant version of the cyclical view:”to a large degree, what could be called the humanitarian growth of the developing world’s middle class since the end of the Cold War has been paid for by fossil-fuel-driven industrialization – an investment in the wellbeing of the global south made by mortgaging the ecological future of the planet” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 54). It would be tempting to extend his analysis back to the industrial Revolution and the emergence of fossil-fuel-driven industrial capitalism, which created enormous progress for the working people in Europe and the US – but which is also the start of the steep growth in pollution and carbon emission that now blocks the arteries of the biosphere.

Late in the twentieth century, there was a reawakening of a more explicitly dedicated social science, and the blooming of innumerable alternatives to traditional social science disciplines. Analytical tools were no longer neutral, but dedicated to social progress.

In the world outside academia, the easy victories of liberal democratic values from the time of the League of Nations and United Nations, went at first unquestioned, as all sorts of non-democratic regimes were signing the Universal Declaration of Human rights and cooperating in the UN system, paying at least lip service the Liberal Democratic values. Human rights developed into more encompassing and more concrete Millennium Development Goals (from 2016, the MDGs became Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs), but all sorts of political regimes were still signing, without intentions of prioritizing the realization of the goals on their own soil.

Recently, new social tensions and political trends have widened the gulf between lofty principles and real action. More and more regimes have been explicitly refusing to stand by the UN standards (Müller, 2013). Parallel to the “Climate Scepticists”, an evolving group of “Social Scepticists” has been questioning the idea of a general perspective of social progress. Sometimes grouped in the category of “Populists”, they have questioned the universality of Human Rights and of the Sustainable Development Goals (Müller, 2017). Likewise, the roles of those supra-national organizations that work towards social progress have been questioned, as have the rule-based norms for international economic and political interaction.

One pushback against the pessimistic thinking of Populism has been the emergence of a small group of “Neo-Optimists”: Claiming that economic developments, contrary to persistent crisis discourse, actually produce social progress (Pinker, 2018; Rosling, 2018), they point to the fact that not only has global GDP grown; the vast majority of people have had an increasing economic growth. In addition, measurable standards of living – like longevity, education, health – have also increased, globally and for most people. In their perception, the twin forces of democracy and science create a process whereby material progress both leads to and is caused by empowerment of broader segments of the population. The inevitability notion of classical (or radical; Israel, 2010) Enlightenment is resurfacing in those works.

In empirical studies of this sort of generalized progress, it has been shown that democracy is associated with higher growth of GDP (Acemoglu, e.a., 2019). This is also institutionally explainable – democracy entails more stable regulatory regimes, supports broader education and a measure of redistribution, etc. The GDP concept is not sensitive to distribution and to human development, but the association of GDP with democracy does indicate the possibilities inherent in democratization, as the Panel also works with.

The IPSP does not deny the findings of generalized measures, but their pithy sentence: “At the peak of opportunities, we are facing an abyss” (Manifesto, 2018, p. 14) points to signs of danger implicit in environmental problems and widespread institutional decay. The IPSP then aims at fighting back – as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) labors to dispel notions of Climate Change as either non-existent or unavoidable, the IPSP wanted to demonstrate, using social science, that social progress is not an inevitability, nor a chimera, but a necessity. Besides the recognition of the disaster waiting at the other side of the “peak of possibilities”, the Preface says: “A better society is indeed possible, its contours can be broadly described, and all we need is to gather forces towards realizing this vision”.

The IPSP Report (IPSP 2018) provides a huge effort at analysis and documentation, summarized in the Manifesto. The work of collating and presenting the whole width of social science’s knowledge

of the causes and effects of progress and decline is a huge accomplishment. The idea of “gather[ing] forces” to create action for a better society, is – by necessity, perhaps – less accomplished. There are good methodical reasons for that, and no obvious strategy. Social change is not an individual affair; existing institutions have to be changed in the direction of advancing social progress, and new organizations and institutions must be created. The Manifesto does not suggest a theory of organizational or institutional change, and does not reflect on the forces that reside in existing institutions, making them deny, ignore or even resist the need for social progress.

The notion of “social progress”

The different social science disciplines have, from time to time, worked towards summary definitions of the state of social affairs. A measure of the quality of human existence, has been worked out as one variable, one concept: happiness, living conditions, real income, etc. Most of those attempts are either very superficial (fx. surveys asking people if they are happy, and to what degree), or very complicated (fx. defining and measuring the bundle of items that constitute living conditions).

Welfare economics allows for the assumption that the satisfaction of people’s consumption preferences is a product of individual choice, based on weighing of preferences. The outcome of a market clearing in a situation where consumers can choose freely, is a certain distribution of buying power. That distribution is always unequal, but it is frequently assumed that redistribution measures can adjust the situation so that everyone has a tolerable share. The problem is that even if preferences are mirrored in the distribution, it is still unequal – and inequality in itself is not only a moral problem (of fairness and equality), but a social problem in itself. Recent social science shows that inequality itself creates social problems – tangible problems like poor health, inferior education, and insufficient integration (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; same, 2018). And the distribution of progress does tend to be skewed – very much so, in recent years (IPSP 2018 vol. 2; Piketty, 2015).

Economics can also handle “externalities” – when calculating the results of one set of market balances, one can decide to factor in consequences in other markets. But there is no ready recipe for the extent of including “external effects”. The decision to “factor in” is classified as a political decision – like the decision to organize redistribution of wealth and income. And political decisions are contingent.

The IPSP Report (2018 a, Ch. 2) spends 45 pages on drawing the contours of a broader, more satisfactory concept of “social progress”. It is seen as a development towards more human flourishing, towards the attainment of a “good society”. There is no final or operational definition, but the report defines a “compass”, a list of variables – values and principles - that point in the direction of progress. In the compressed version of the Manifesto (p. 3), the formulation is:

“... the key values and principles underlying this book, including wellbeing and freedom, security and solidarity, as well as pluralism and toleration, distributive justice and equity, environmental preservation, transparency, and democracy. Any project that would severely crush one of these values and principles is considered objectionable here”.

In the absence of a clear and operational definition, here is two interpretations that seem validated by the Manifesto and Report:

- the broad canvas of values and principles seems to indicate a *holistic* notion: all the values and all the principles work together, and all are essential elements in social progress. If any

of them are not honored, progress is less than it could be – and it will frequently affect the achievements in other areas. How much, depends on the concrete situation.

- Benefits may derive from partial improvements, but in determining whether social progress is taking place, it is not considered legitimate to ignore (wholly or partially) groups or issues that are relevant to the total picture. A certain weighing of issues is unavoidable – some are potential disasters, like war, climate change and biological extinction; others are merely serious nuisances, like deficient education or moderate poverty. Thus, the conclusion to the question of social progress is again dependent on concrete circumstances, and necessarily complicated.

The concept of progress assumes that historical development takes place. The IPSP publications work on the premise of development, but avoids the view of an inevitable March of History – in the sense of Hegel, Marx and later philosophers; Fukuyama is often read as a neo-Hegelian, as his classical volume on political evolution saw liberal democracy as a sort of end point of “history”. While Marx saw class struggle as the motor of history, Hegel the World Spirit, Fukuyama (1989) envisaged “Modernity” as the direction of the automatic movement, driven by the development of science. In the IPSP philosophy, there is a directionality to social progress, but no inevitability; it is an ideal of a benign historical development that can be realized if a sufficient number of agents work for it. Cooperation is essential, and democracy is necessary for the creation of social progress.

A radical alternative to both the inevitable March of History, and to the idea of contingent evolution, is a way of thinking that appears both in China and Russia. Both countries and their governance systems are discussed further below – but at this point it is worth noticing that both regimes cultivate a *cyclical* notion of history: society is constant, the regime is perfect, development is unnecessary. Attacks on the given system from “outside”, however, keep reappearing, necessitating strong countermeasures from the beneficial regime (Garnaut, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2017; Snyder, 2018). Both regimes see the “West” as the enemy to be mistrusted and kept at bay.

Creating and maintaining social progress – organizational forms

Obviously, the problem of implementation or realization looms large in the investigations of social progress. The challenges to human development are made by humans and can be eliminated by human action – but agency isn’t just an analytical possibility. It is contingent, depending on a configuration of forces that spring from the very social structure it works on. The IPSP Report and the Manifesto address the question of agency first by listing the democratic principles that must be pursued in order to create social progress (Manifesto, 2018, IPSP 2018 a-c). Those democratic principles are seen as necessary elements in the institutional conditions for social progress.

Acknowledging the contingent nature of agency, the IPSP tries to point out that extra-governmental initiative is required. One of the “false ideas” pointed out in the Manifesto (p.5) is: that “salvation comes [only] from politics, and from changing government policy”. Seeing how incalcitrant most current governments are on issues of progress, The Manifesto launches an idea of “change makers”, individuals and groups that should work for progressive reforms emerge in all walks of life – corporations, offices, civil society organizations, public agencies, etc. (pp. 193 ff).

The “change maker” notion is laudable, and the idea is being pursued: digital networks like Avaaz and We Move work to mobilize dedicated individuals for progressive causes, and have some success in stopping flagrant mistakes in the political systems. Analytically, however, there is scant reason to

expect such initiatives to be sufficiently persistent, strong and stable to bring about the changes necessary.

Governments do exist and will continue to dominate the institutional development of human societies. The IPSP works recognize that in trying to identify what governments must do to develop a progressive society. They present a list of “Principles Applicable to Governments”, containing four principles:

- The rule of law
- Transparency and accountability
- Democracy
- Giving rights determinate reality

The report argues that only by following those four principles can governments create and maintain a basis for social progress². While this is probably true at the level of principles, and while the Report documents the deficiencies of current institutions, it has no convincing answer to the question of getting there – how can the classical liberal ideas of governance finally be realized?

Progressive action is not only difficult because of the inherent biases of existing governmental institutions. Neither do the size of the task and the complexity of the involved interests suffice to describe the difficulties. The realization of the extent and strength of the pushback (see also Manifesto, 2018, p. 82) expands the study of social progress into both a defensive and an offensive field: in which ways, through which institutions and strategies is social progress threatened, and how can it be defended? And how can social progress be supported and developed in new areas, new directions?

Power and progress

Any structure of governing institutions has its own effects, and no institutional system is “neutral”. One illustration may be the effect of a strict hierarchy: If a governmental structure is a strict and strong hierarchy, the central government will form an abstract notion of issues, and the local governments will receive instructions of a general and abstract character. In China (see the China section below), environmental measures are commanded from the center in general and ideological terms. They have been very slow in becoming realities in the Chinese local governments, despite the draconic tools used to control regional and local authorities and politicians. Concrete problems weave together social, economic and political concerns, and the outcome is frequently different from the declared policies.

As another illustration, one may look at the way the Federal US government is layered. Lisa Miller (2010) demonstrates that the Federal structure biases crime control policies and institutions away from social initiatives, like prevention and education, that are relevant and possible at the local level, towards measures of a more general nature: police actions involving violence and incarceration.

² The four principles look very much like the ideals of the Enlightenment and of the liberal movements that developed out of the French and American revolutions. Indeed, it has been frequently argued that the present Postmodern and Conservative developments in Western politics is in many ways an attempt at rolling back the Enlightenment – either to transcend it in a progressive direction, or to counter the liberal ideals emanating from Enlightenment thinking.

These illustrations point towards the question of “institutional fit”: which institutions are adequate for addressing what problems in their contexts? In the discussions of development policies, the World Bank has been consistently liberalist, recommending the “Washington consensus” of floating currencies, privatization, low taxes and deregulation. In 2017, the WB accepted that those economic policies were not sufficient, in the context of developing economies, and seemingly changed its tack; the 2017 World Development Report was entitled “Government and the Law”. A series of recommendations spoke about better institutions – less corruption, better courts, more efficient tax collection, etc. As pointed out by critics (Bangura, 2017), those institutions are still neoliberal and not likely to jump start development: the context – power structures, social inequality, dependence on foreign capital and organizations, etc. – is still not adequate to a proper functioning of liberal institutions, even if their quality is improved.

Institutions, then, can not be reduced to tools for policy implementation. And governing is not only about planning and goal attainment; the possession of governmental *power* is a purpose in itself – as Foucault (and Nietzsche; see Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 93f.) put it, all human communication (and, implicitly, interaction) contains an aspect of power. A governance institution that produces greater equality will also reproduce the power of those who are ‘in power’ and those who possess relevant resources. China is a particularly good example of the contradiction between policy goals and power concerns: the CCP wants social and material progress and a sustainable environment; those goals are the fundamental legitimation of the Chinese regime. The attainment of them are, however, made very difficult by the priority given to power concerns, the maintenance of the Party monopoly on power (see China section below).

This means that any change and innovation in governance institutions must be introduced against institutional inertia and against the resistance of those who are already embedded in the governance system. At times, innovations may appear obvious improvements on existing ones – but very often, embedded interests will have to be convinced that change is necessary. Even if the validity of the arguments for change is well established as scientifically valid and socially progressive, the power aspects of such changes is ubiquitous.

It also means that any reform of the governance systems creates new nodes of power, new opportunities for individual and asocial interests to insert themselves. Such interests will not only creep in through the cracks, but enter through the planned openings³.

This “triple dynamic” of fighting, using and creating power has to be considered when governance reforms are deliberated and attempted. A difficult consideration that is complicated by the emergence of illiberal forces and ideologies that play important roles also in contemporary societies.

Liberal governance versus neoliberal ideology

First, it is necessary to take a look at a major force that works against the ideals of liberal democracy and social progress: the strictures of neoliberal government that prevent the passing of progressive policies and open the political systems to massive influence from wealthy people.

“Neoliberal” ideology is often presented as designating just a set of economic policies – monetarism, privatization, free movements for goods, capital and people. In that shape, it is hardly regressive, and social progress is a possibility, if the political system provides income support and welfare

³ The Brexit chaos still blooming at the time of writing this paper (April 2019) may be the best illustration of this double dynamic: the Brexiteers use the Brexit decision to make a reach for power – but the dynamics set in motion by the process seems to thwart their intentions, resulting in an unstable process of institutional change.

institutions. The meaning of the term “neoliberal” has changed over time (Springer e.a., eds, 2016), but in recent decades, “neoliberal” means not just a support for market-oriented, state-reducing policies, but a mode of governance that introduces market mechanisms in all societal institutions.

Applying market-inspired techniques is not politically neutral. It leads to restrictions on income support, limits to welfare policies and to public spending and services. It subordinates social and cultural policies to the dictates of the markets – or rather: dictates of the Finance Ministry based on monetary models. Furthermore, neoliberalism is not consistent in its support of the market: in many cases, neoliberal policies accept and support restricted competition – and the sort of competition recommended is one where those with resources are superior to those without (William Davies, 2017).

Neo-liberalism is very much a US development, although its ideological roots are in Europe (Streeck, 2016, p. 154) and its dissemination has been through international organizations like the WTO and OECD. In one form or another, neoliberalism is at work in most states. The US was the first (or perhaps second) liberal democracy, and has had democratic elections, independent courts and free media longer than any other country. Recently, however, the strong injection of neoliberal thought has produced governance formats that make it difficult to support the poor, deliver decent public services, and preserve the environment.

Some of the discussion of the negative effects of neoliberalism is conducted in political economy and development economics circles discussing policy paradigms for development. The “Washington consensus” was originally a strict market-liberal prescription for developing countries, implemented as a condition for receiving financial support from the IMF and World Bank. Its failure to deliver the promised economic growth led to a recognition of the shortcomings of liberal economic prescriptions, and a stronger emphasis on conditionality, including more careful use of conditions (Babb, 2012). The Washington Consensus is no longer a consensus, but the launching of a “Beijing consensus” to replace has so far not been taken seriously.

The effects of neoliberal policies are not only on economic policy; general deregulation and privatization has very strong effects on media, communication and culture. Among the deregulation measures, regulations of political finance are scrapped or loosened. That leaves the political system open to influence from wealthy people and large organizations, who are not accountable for their political views.

Likewise, in the realm of IT, the first IT gurus and prophets, seeing a boundless liberating force in untrammelled global information sharing, gained support from neoliberal thinking. The strong reluctance to regulate IT businesses led to global technology companies being able to both cheat tax systems and steal their users’ data. Lack of regulation has also opened the Internet to people wishing to disrupt the democratic process.

Neoliberalism feeds the tax-avoidance movements and industries, justifying almost any plot to avoid paying tax. The result of that is a weakening of the state both as a regulator, an authority, and as a supervisor of social affairs and a provider of public services. The management of public institutions mimics market mechanisms, and the productivity of public institutions is measured in monetary terms. The result is privatization, where possible, or else the introduction of contrived competition mechanisms that favor those who are already strong.

Already in the 1940ies, Karl Polanyi (1944) wrote about the necessity of re-embedding the markets for things that were not really economic goods: labor, raw materials and capital⁴. Neo-liberals have continuously invented new arguments for not following Polanyi's advice, claiming that they see the asocial effects of economic processes as marginal, accidental or reversible: If a nation has enough economic wealth, it can decide to spend some of it on helping the poor. If there is not enough to go around, it cannot. As Piketty (2014) shows, however: apart from a short period after the Second World War, the Western economies haven't used their growing wealth to even out the social cleavages. In brief, Neoliberal governance has made the rich richer; everything else is contingent.

In the liberal model of democracy, the democratic institutions and processes could lead to actions that would halt the negative development. Those institutions and processes are, however, also under pressure from the neoliberal wave – very visibly in the US, a few groups of very wealthy people dominate the media, money-based lobbyists strongly influence the parliament, and politicians are forced to raise huge sums for their political careers through fund-raising among the very rich. A growing wave of lower-class protest is channeled through commercial media and the moneyed lobbyists into conduits that break down the workings of the liberal democracy.

Resistance to progress - Illiberal forms of government

When governments are not democratic⁵, they will assume other forms that serve different purposes from the social progress sought by democracies. Some of the most blatant dictatorships are obvious obstacles to social progress – the dictators mostly run the government as tools to their own private wealth. Acemoglu and Robertson (2013) provide some very graphic examples – from Uzbekistan, where the government orders schoolchildren to pick cotton that is then exported by companies owned by the President and his cronies; to Egypt, where a clique of very wealthy men, connected to the President, run all the most important businesses, without competition, and harvest gigantic profits.

Those classical-style dictatorships are very efficient in controlling their own economies (although very poor at *growing* the economies), but not very interested in influencing other nations. They sometimes do proclaim an ideology, but often pretend to be neutral caretaker systems ensuring that the nation survives, economically and institutionally.

Some of those non-democratic regime types are simply dictatorships. Some dress their tyranny in ideological terms – Communist or Islamist dictatorships: in Saudi Arabia and its client states, and in Iran (Turkey may be next), the official ideology is that the form of government is divinely ordained. As such, it automatically aspires to global emulation; most gods are universal. Accordingly, those states infiltrate neighbors and fund rebellious groups in other countries. It has serious consequences for those other countries – the Saudis funding madrassas and Al-Qaeda, the Iranians Hizbollah, etc.). The global intentions, however, do not seem to be serious; rather, the militia and terror groups supported by the Islamic regimes are used to demonstrate the power and dedication of the ruling elites, to convince their own citizens and the governments in the affected countries that they must be taken into account. The rulers of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – and their cronies, be they family, anointed clerics or just business acquaintances - have become extremely wealthy and are

⁴ Lately, the “free market in information” has been questioned by communication and digitalization theorists. Information, understood as true statements and facts, is not a reproducible good: truth is not fabricated, but discovered (Rosenfeld, 2019)

⁵ “Democratic” in this paper refers to the liberal notion of democracy – not to the original meaning of ‘mob rule’, nor to the notions of democracy limited to the existence of elections.

protecting their wealth with the resources appropriated ostensibly for national and spiritual purposes.

A small handful of nominally Communist dictatorships persist – Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and North Korea – but the element of communism is disappearing in favor of various idiosyncratic notions. The governance systems of those four have seemingly little in common, and they attract extremely few followers in other countries.

Other illiberal regimes present more systematic challenges to any global order that exists, or should exist. The Russian model of extreme nationalism with fascist undertones, and the Chinese model of centralized Party dictatorship are examples worth looking at, since they influence large parts of the world: Russia via military provocations and internet trolling, and through building relationships with the extreme Right political groupings in Europe. China via its huge economic and financial weight, controlled by a state that has global ambitions.

China: Neo-communism

To designate the Chinese governmental institutions as a form of “communism” can seem preposterous: few places on Earth are more socially and economically unequal than China, and ordinary citizens are not allowed to participate in decision-making (Minxin Pei, 2006). What China carries over from Communism is merely an idea of a Party vanguard, ruling in the name of everybody and by the right of having the correct understanding of societal affairs. Still, the “Chinese model” is overwhelmingly powerful and needs a name.

China is building a system of government that does have its roots in classical, i.e. Soviet, models, but contains significant changes and is moving in its own ways, towards goals that are hard to foresee. On one hand, the notion of a Party that has a monopoly of power and no constitutional limits to its powers, is retained; on the other hand, private ownership of means of production and of financial organizations is allowed, even encouraged, with limits that are real but not explicitly defined.

The huge government machine maintains its legitimacy by delivering material improvements to very large segments of the population – and through extensive manipulation of all aspects of culture and communication. The challenge of diversity – China is incredibly large and contains hundreds of ethnic groups – is met by political centralization: many regional differences in social and cultural affairs exist, but politically, there is only one national Party⁶. All sectoral and regional parts of the party must obey and transmit the messages from the center. No organization, however strong and well organized, can govern 1.2 billion citizens without meeting dissent and local dynamism. And increasing levels of material and education resources create a growing potential for local initiatives. The Chinese response has been to allow a few experiments in the selection of local authorities – but mostly a reinforced mind control effort, reaching from large-scale Internet censorship to a planned change of the ethnic and cultural composition of regional populations, using ruthless methods in Tibet and Xinjiang. At the time of writing (March 2019), new initiatives are being announced of sending young people from the large cities to stay in villages, ostensibly to energize and inspire the peasants, furthering rural development.

As mentioned above, any political development is also a question of power. In China, that can be stated very openly. In a speech on December 18, 2018, Xi stated that the first lesson of the last four

⁶ Nominally, the National People’s Congress has a handful of small ‘parties’ that are not identical with the CCP – but they are closely aligned with and directed from the CCP (McGregor, 2010).

decades of reform was that ‘the Party’s leadership over all tasks must be adhered to, and the Party’s leadership must be incessantly strengthened and improved’ (Farelli, e.a., 2018).

The massive investments in industry and trade made by the Chinese government since the nineties have created social progress for hundreds of millions of Chinese people. The limits to progress, caused by the governance system developed in China, are paradoxically both over-centralization and a deficit of central control.

The Chinese political system is over-centralized; the overwhelming emphasis on keeping the Party in power strangles the conduits that should channel information from the diversity of Chinese local communities and social systems to the decision centers. The risk of misaligning the needs of the citizens with the government’s policies is very large. The space for developing ‘human flourishing’ in the spirit of the IPSP initiative seems very limited, as material needs are met, but personal freedom constricted. Lots of discussions of political and social issues are excluded from the public sphere and never taken in by the center. Thousands of public protests against governmental and local authority projects are taking place every year, but practically none of them are reported in the national press.

The Chinese economic system is under-centralized; despite the strict control over political statements exercised from the Beijing top, real action at the local level is mostly decided by the local Party representative (McGregor, 2010). Zhao Ziyang, the former Prime Minister (deposed because of the Tian Anmen debacle), declared that China’s present is no worse than the early days of raw capitalism, but that the Chinese system is unable to create progress, the way that capitalism did. He also said that the regional governing system in China looked very much like a Mafia organization (Levine, 2011). The Party center has realized that it must change tack on some issues, and is trying, at least rhetorically: a discussion of the need for creativity and innovation keeps returning, but the strict centralized control of the contents of education as well as cultural manifestations restrain the development of creativity. Regular government exhortations to develop creativity struggle to initiate its growth, because the incentives at the local level are for strict obedience and draconic consequences for any rebels. The problem of environmental policy is another example: the government issues statements and guidelines emphasizing the importance of fighting pollution, soil depletion, and bad air quality. The local authorities, however, are incentivized by the proceeds from taxation and the income from land trade and local business. If local citizens demonstrate to argue for cleaner environments, they are quickly and often effectively silenced. China remains the world’s largest emitter of CO₂, with little prospect of a serious change in the near future. A third example is the endemic illegal acquisition of public assets that goes on in China, where the number of new billionaires is constantly growing. This acquisition is possible because property rules are unclear, supervision from the center is weak, and local elites are able to collude in taking over public companies that own natural resources (Minxin Pei, 2016).

In liberal democracies, courts and popular movements function as feed back mechanisms, correctives to governments’ policies and actions. The Chinese political-economic system is busily shielding itself from such feedback mechanisms. The courts are under party control and the laws, according to Western observers, are mostly guidelines (McGregor, 2010, pp. 24-25). The more-or-less private companies that now run big parts of the Chinese economy, are encouraged to establish Party Committees that will keep them under control (McGregor 2010, pp. 34 ff). The public discourse, in other countries taking place in both general and social media, is controlled and restricted, avoiding inputs from dissenting voices. Chinese science is now at a very high level (measure, for example, by the number of patents acquired annually) – but the Party issues directives as to what can be taught and what cannot.

China has been presenting itself as a model for third world countries to follow: away from the former colonial powers, teaming up with the one example of liberation from Western Imperialism, working together in solidarity and mutual interest. This appeal has been launched since the Bandung conference in 1955, and in the new millennium, China has worked towards attaining “soft power”, a positive reputation for efficient governance. In the first decade of the 2000s, the idea was suggested of forwarding a “Beijing Consensus” as an alternative to the “Washington consensus” – a model of state-led modernization instead of the relentless pursuit of free-market, private initiatives (Huang, 2010). China made a demonstrative effort to support many of the countries suffering from the 2008 Financial Crisis. The “Belt and Road” initiative was the last great step in that direction. It initiated very large infrastructural projects all along the imagined New Silk Road from China to Europe and the Middle East, as well as large industrial and infrastructural projects in Africa.

Recently, however, criticism of the terms for the infrastructural loans and the results of the projects has come forward, and several Third World governments have scaled back their participation. The result is that China is seen as propping up some of the world’s worst dictatorships, preventing much-needed social progress. The Zambian and Ethiopian examples, especially, do not exhibit the social progress prophesized for such alliances (Dynamic, 2018). China invests freely, but without regard for the social reality in the target countries, and the result is temporary and possibly lopsided economic growth, with long-term financial challenges and without social progress. Issues of social fairness and human rights are not approachable by a Chinese government building its domestic legitimacy on an ideology of authoritarian, technocratic paternalism. As formulated by John Fitzgerald in “Inside Story”:

“...with its bulging wallet, the CPC regime’s check-book diplomacy across the world has already enabled it to become the blood transfusion machine for other authoritarian countries – using economic and trade interests to divide Western alliances, and using large markets to entice and threaten Western capital” (Fitzgerald, 2017)

The Belt and Road initiative by the Chinese government demonstrates the weakness of a system that tries to be capitalist but lacks some of the institutions of liberal capitalism. The giant Chinese firms that are taking advantage of the BRI megaprojects, are under Party control, but not exposed to the critical attention and disciplining force of international organizations and legal systems. The result is that many of the BRI projects have a bad reputation and corruption is endemic:

“As Chinese companies push deeper into emerging markets, inadequate enforcement and poor business practices are turning the BRI into a global trail of trouble. A long list of Chinese companies have been debarred from the World Bank and other multilateral development banks for fraud and corruption, which covers everything from inflating costs to giving bribes.” (Hillman, 2019, referencing Transparency International).

The other side of soft power was the ambition to influence the popular image of China – the 2008 Olympics was the peak of a long series of seemingly apolitical efforts aiming at creating a positive image of China and its ability to satisfy its population. The end of that effort may be the recent initiative to create what the Chinese call “social governance” – a combination of the Artificial Intelligence and surveillance potentialities currently being installed, and the Social Credit system also being built in China. An intensive, close-up, detailed governance system able to manage, even micro-manage, the behavior of civilians, locking up those who need a change of mind in big camps in Xinjiang, looks like the final realization of an overwhelming Big Brother society. A system very much suited to retain power for the ruling clique, through all sorts of negative sanctions – and much less

suitable for a productive and creative development of society towards better conditions for the citizens (Hoffman, 2017).

Also the Belt and Road initiative, launched as a soft power initiative to work with friendly governments all along the Silk Road, is developing aspects of naked, unsoftened power. According to a CIA report, China seems to be on the move to establish military bases in strategic locations with the aim of protecting its largest Belt and Road investments (Guardian, May 3, 2019).

Neo-fascism

The post-Communist, post-Soviet, Russian Federation, retains a legacy of both Czarist autocracy and Communist party rule. A veneer of liberal economy and democracy was added in the 1990'ies, but the result is a peculiar mix of pre-democratic authorities, a czar-like regime, an oligopolistic economy, and illiberal ideology, verging on fascism (Ostrovsky, 2015; Snyder, 2018).

There is no identifiable governance 'system' in Russia, no fixed format of state institutions. Thus, no model to take over by others. The reason for including a short section on Russia in this paper is that Russia still tries to be a world power; despite a declining population, and an economy that is small and in consistently bad shape, Russia tries to retain its superpower status, its influence in many parts of the world. The regime actively pursues alliances with regimes and political groupings that vie for power, exploiting the turbulence of a world that is painfully adjusting to a post-national, globalized world economy. Russia is also actively intervening in the political processes of Western nations, supporting disruptive right wing radicals and populist politicians. The result is that numerous illiberal political movements in liberal democracies in the West are drawing support and inspiration from Russia. Only a few of those will actively support Russian policies, but their existence and activities make Western governments less effective, and the determination to stand against Russian aggressions weakens.

Russia is, in practice, far less centralized than China. The regional governors are supervised from Moscow, and replaced if they do things the President doesn't like, but are otherwise left to their own devices. The main structural difference is that there is no ideological Party that rules Russia. The parliament, the Duma, has a Presidential Party that is assured, through electoral manipulation, a constant absolute majority of parliamentary votes. Opposition parties do exist, but are largely without influence.

Russia is not nominally a one-party system; its legitimacy must be acquired along other channels than the Party-as-revolutionary-vanguard, like the Soviet Union and currently China. And China has, besides the peculiar "vanguard" notion, a legitimacy resting on its focus on economic growth. It is not just lip service – the Party has delivered on that point. In Russia, keeping the ruling clique in charge entails large scale media manipulation – not least the control of TV, which since Gorbachov's time has been the crux of Russian political power (Ostrovsky, 2015, *passim*). The President promises economic improvement, but does not deliver. The "West" is regularly blamed for his inability to provide. The economic strategy is shortsighted, to survive by selling minerals and chemicals to the world, and investment in productivity is lacking. A statement by a Russian economist characterizes it thus:

"The government could take the position that the creation of jobs and economic growth are temporarily more important than collecting taxes, and that it is better to let people earn money on their own than to put them on the government payroll. That would not require any radical political changes, but even that step remains unfeasible as long as Russia's business and government officials are so closely interconnected" (V. Inozemtsev, 2016).

The governing clique builds enormous private fortunes out of the gas, etc., exports⁷, and lots of it is banked in the West. The state budget is heavily burdened by military expenses. Russia is constantly provoking armed conflicts – or the illusion of such – that are exploited to mobilize the population on an agenda of extreme nationalism. The declared philosophy of the governing clique borrows heavily from Fascist ideology, where the Fatherland is sacred, the supreme leader is saintly, and sacrifices made for patriotic reasons are better than social progress (Snyder, 2018).

Economically, while Moscow and a few other big cities are experiencing economic growth, living standards remain very low, and there is very little in the way of social subsidies and services to the majority of the population. A huge need for investment in extractive and productive industry is unmet. Politically, Russia is a special case of a very corrupt autocracy:

“Putin has created a political system based on the redistribution of property, widespread corruption among government officials, the domination of security services, and informal flows of income distributed according to political necessity” (Inozemtsev, 2011).

Politically, the regime is keeping the country on a sort of war-like footing, where several incursions on business and civil liberties are justified as measures against external ‘enemies’. Opponents are sentenced to draconic punishment on vague charges of sketchily defined transgressions like “hooliganism”, making courts political instruments for the regime. Russia has more independent media than China, but the noose is constantly tightening. Critical journalists are being harassed, some killed. TV stations are being taken over by oligarchs (Ostrovsky, 2015). In April 2019, Russia is going the Chinese way with Internet control. A new bill has been passed (with 95% of votes in the Duma) that allows the government to cut off the country’s internet traffic as a measure of “protecting the Internet from foreign interventions”. When the law is activated, all internal internet traffic will be carried within the country’s own networks. Any traffic that leaves Russia must then go through registered exchange points, subject to regulation by the state communications regulator *Roskomnadzor* (Guardian, April 11, 2019).

In foreign policy, Russia seems to intentionally work against social progress: the regimes and political parties that they support are all disruptive, corrupt and populist⁸. As a policy choice, this pattern of cooperation is significant and possibly to some degree systemic: the ideological definitions of Russia as a sacred Motherland, under attack from inferior evil enemies, and its president as superior and divinely chosen, not only enable and justify almost any transgression of international law and relations, it also more or less compels them.⁹

⁷ According to investigating NGOs, President Vladimir Putin may be the wealthiest man on Earth for the time being. His wealth is owned in conjunction with members of his family and several “oligarchs” in his network (Quartz, April 2019).

⁸ Earlier, Russia would cooperate with Left populists – and there is still some cooperation with the Latin American populists that declare themselves Communist. In Europe, however, Russia sides with the illiberal governments in the “Visegrad” group (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Czech Republic) and in Serbia. Also with the Extreme Right parties in some EU countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Greece, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom). In this way, Russia has made a very wide turn – from the Soviet Union as the stalwart defender of Communism and opponent to fascism, to modern Russia, siding with notorious fascists.

⁹ One example: the gas pipeline called Nord Stream 2 (Number one already exists) is under construction, but has met Danish resistance, because it is owned by Gazprom – a company that has served the Russian government as a political tool, not least in Ukraine where it was part of an arm twisting operation to punish Ukraine for trying to become independent. The Russian stance of aggressive bullying (latest in a very angry statement from Gazprom, condemning the Danish hesitation (Politiken, April 16, 2019) and self-righteous sensitivity makes it impossible for Russia to sit down and negotiate: permits for the lucrative gas pipeline in

With Russian assistance, governments in the West are doing badly in many places: the UK is in shambles over Brexit, Italy has an impossible government of two sorts of populists, several Nordic countries are in deep trouble over how to assemble a political majority without the participation and/or support of the extreme Right, France is fighting a street revolt of very aggressive National Front supporters, the USA has a president that completely belies any notion of Presidential behavior, etc. The EU has trouble deciding important legislation because “EU skepticism” is very visible in most member countries. All this has been supported by Russian use of Internet disruption, financial support to Right populists, and ongoing interaction with illiberals.

Working for social progress is not something the Russian political system can decide; all its routines, all its internal and external relations are either directly opposed – as when Western elections and parliaments are hacked – or neglect the possibility of working for social progress.

A note about social science

The road to social progress must go through governance arrangements where the needs and wishes of citizens are recognized and incorporated in political decisions and administrative processes. Such arrangements are complicated to imagine and difficult to establish, always balancing on the edge between power and progress. The emergence of very strong, very powerful regimes that are working against popular participation, human rights and equal representation, makes the task daunting, to the brink of impossibility.

Social science has a mission at this point – to analyze existing governance arrangements, making clear what sort of improvements that are necessary and possible, in order to support and stabilize improvements. Social science cannot be socially neutral, it must select its fundamental notions of human nature, social relations, and human behavior. Moreover, its epistemology determines the kind of objects it works with. Being a non-objective branch of science, social science needs legitimization through the process that produces it. And that is no easy thing these days. The wave of illiberal movements and authoritarian governments and their aggressive destabilizing of democracy, also carries trouble for social science. The most direct recent event has been Jair Bolsonaro’s declaration the Brazil should stop subsidizing all university programs in humanities and social science. But also China’s tighter control of social science, especially of its mighty Chinese Academy of Social Science, the current American president’s denial of the concept of truth point to hard times for social science.

As Rosenfeldt puts it, an epistemological crisis is unfolding, where all sorts of impulsive or manipulative talk is offered as sources of an immediate truth, and there is a free choice for everyone to select one’s own truth (Rosenfeld, 2019, Ch. 4). In line with the “change agents” of the Manifesto, Rosenfeld sees the need for citizen organization that work to support the legitimacy of truth, of real news and facts, without striving for dominance and without excluding authentic movements of ordinary people.

The active role of social science has been called “phronetic” science – a science that follow the method rules but is also directed towards a constructive aim, and working in conjunction with other agents in a specific field (Flyvbjerg, 2001; see also Flyvbjerg, e.a., eds., 2001). There is no sure method of explaining what social science could and should do, with encountering accusations of

return for an apology and a realistic promise to stop using gas for political pressure. Russia, always suffering from hostile foreigners, cannot do wrong. And Russia, proud of its might and power, cannot back off.

bias. But neither does an approach exist that evades the responsibility of trying to support the forces that are attempting to squeeze short-sighted profits out of the destruction of democracy and biology.

The basis of this paper has been to claim that institutions matter – that one set of governance arrangements, no matter its background and intentions, can only produce a certain range of outcomes, and if we want different outcomes, it is necessary to change the institutions. In the IPSP Report and in the Manifesto, it is made clear that the institutions of market capitalism produce and increase global inequality. And with increasing global inequality, social development takes a negative turn. Likewise, Rosenfeld shows that inequality is the important factor behind much of the communication and information crises currently unfolding: “money seems to create distinctions in almost every aspect of American life, including perceptions, trust, and the rest” (p.172). Those distinctions come in the way of creating a democratic dialogue and further the development of adversary, aggressive media for communication.

A practical perspective on social science does not, of course, guarantee immediate influence. And a broad subject like social progress does not have a single field of application, nor a ready set of interlocutors, since it comprises everything and everybody. What social science can do in relation to the burning problem of social progress, is to develop notions of governance forms that are able to deliver progress – both by pointing to the shortcomings of existing governance arrangements, and by suggestion better forms. The “phronesis” perspective then requires that social scientists work with the people who try to build governance systems for progress – social scientists must sign up to be “change makers” in the sense of the IPSP Report and the Manifesto.

APPENDIX

The list of reform suggestions in the Manifesto contains the following:

In the **Economic system**, reforms should address:

- corporate structure and business formats (pp. 131-32):
 - restrictions on limited liability
 - strengthening stakeholders against shareholders
 - introducing societal concerns in company purposes
 - facilitate inclusive and progressive business models

- political influence of corporations (p 139):
 - transparency in corporate financing of political organizations and activities
 - strengthening fiscal responsibility, including the closing of tax havens
 - develop new managerial ideologies that are inclusive and progressive

- competitive market regulations (pp 143-45)
 - Strengthen anti-trust rules
 - Incentivize startups
 - Develop a public debate of the limits of the market
 - Encourage the development of non-market organizational forms

For the **social system** (pp. 166-70) a form of decentralized social democracy, or “emancipating state” is suggested that will improve allocation and distribution through introducing:

- Minimum wage policies
- Workplaces improvement
- Income supports (universal basic income is discussed)

- Lifelong learning
- Reducing taxes on labor
- Externality pricing
- Taming the tech companies and their gig economy
- Taxing rent

The **political system** is also discussed. The Manifesto tries to avoid being “political”, suggesting instead “socially diffuse progress” (p.173), which does not invite the establishment of explicitly political organizations. But politics is necessary: “at some point, the generalization of the reform and its crystallization in robust institutions requires legal backing” (p. 173). For reforms of the political system, the following is suggested (pp. 173-91):

- Reforming political finance through democratic citizens’ councils that allocate an aggregate “political budget” for campaigning.
- Limit the effect of lobbying through transparency and control
- Expand the involvement of citizens into several processes, like governance budgets
- Make media and communication infrastructure a public good, governed by new organizations that are not market-based and not government-controlled
- Improving electoral systems that are biased towards the rich and the incumbent

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