

## CALL FOR PAPERS – THE AMBIVALENCE OF PROGRESS

### **Basic information:**

Type of event: PhD and postdoc workshop

Topic: The Ambivalence of Progress

Location: Ljubljana, Slovenia

Workshop dates: November 7<sup>th</sup> to November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Application deadline (extended): July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024

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### **Description of the topic:**

Progress is an intricate notion. On the one hand, contemporary societies seem to be better off than societies of the past by many indications: modern economic growth is unprecedented, life expectancy is higher than it's ever been, new technologies have enabled possibilities that previous generations could only dream of, wars between great powers have been on the decline, etc. All this would seem to naturally inspire optimism about the nature of historical development. One can mention Steven Pinker as the recent outstanding promoter of this view.

There are, however, many objections that can be raised. Economic expansion resulted in an unprecedented destruction of the environment, which is certain to entail major political and social consequences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The level of inequality both between and within countries is still very high and has been growing in the neoliberal period, which points to the fact that many countries and social groups have been excluded from the fruits of progress. Technological advancements may have opened up new possibilities, but they also unleashed new problems, including new kinds of violence and warfare. There is furthermore the inherent power disparity and exploitative nature of class relations in capitalism, which profoundly affects most people's everyday life. Progress has many flip sides.

The dilemma is not new. While it was lurking in the background for most of human history, the notion of progress came to the fore in the age of enlightenment and was one of the defining ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, informing the ruling ideologies. However, this faith in progress came to a halt in the face of the two world wars and the rise of totalitarian regimes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After its resumption in the post-war period, another climax of the belief in progress was the period of the 1990s, when history itself was famously proclaimed to be at an end. This optimism was once again short-lived, since the events of 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis and the

rise of new populisms complicated any simple historical narrative. Hence it seems that the idea of progress itself tends to have a cyclical – rather than a progressive – history.

The notion of progress is also connected with differing approaches to understanding long-term historical developments, which have of course always been an important part of historiography and the social sciences. To give just one example: the canonical historical materialist perspective viewed history as a series of modes of production progressing toward ever-greater technological advancement, indicating an over-arching logic that stretches over millennia. However, this view has been extensively challenged, particularly for its teleological structure, which suggests that a different way of characterizing human history may be more appropriate.

These predicaments also take on a specific flavour in the local Slovenian context. While the older historiography, which understood Slovenian history as a grand march toward national independence, has been largely superseded, most contemporary historians would probably agree that the falling apart of Yugoslavia and the transition to liberal democracy was a welcome development. Leftwing critics, on the other hand, point to the price that was paid for this advance: the steep rise of precarious work, the unequal distribution of wealth, the corrosion of social welfare, etc. The transition to capitalism and liberal democracy resulted in a number of negative developments, which one has to take into account in understanding the history of Slovenia since its independence.

All this suggests that progress is an ambivalent and multi-faceted notion that should be used with a great deal of caution and reflection. How, then, should we think about the major changes that happened with the onset of modernity? What are alternative ways of thinking about the long-term development of human societies? How was progress conceptualized in different historical epochs? To what extent did notions of progress differ between different regions and different social groups, and what can we learn from such comparisons? How should we understand the transitions between different political regimes, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

### **Application guidelines:**

This is a non-exhaustive list of topics that will be discussed at this year's PhD and postdoc workshop, organized by junior researchers Robin Dolar, Aljaž Sekne and Žiga Smolič at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. The workshop will be held from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 and will consist of 20-minute presentations with subsequent discussion as well as lunch and dinner for the participants. We are accepting applications, which should include an abstract of around 150 words and up to 5 keywords on the proposed topic of presentation, until the 7<sup>th</sup> of July at the following address: [progress.workshop24@gmail.com](mailto:progress.workshop24@gmail.com). Students who aren't compensated by their universities can be offered partial financial aid.