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Bending Towards Justice: Progress and Societal Narratives

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Abstract: Throughout history, changing societal narratives have played important roles in fostering social change, bringing about progress. However, historical progress is not linear; instead, it is a paradoxical concept involving social advancements, regressions, and ongoing struggles for justice and equality. A myriad of historical and contemporary movements for social justice have contributed to the complex path towards addressing the persistent inequalities and challenges faced by marginalized groups worldwide. Despite these attempts, questions arise regarding the extent to which progress has been realized and whether the ideals of progress envisioned by early theorists align with contemporary realities. This paper delves into case studies of numerous significant global movements, including feminism, anti-racism, Indigenous rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and strides toward liberal democracy, to assess how progress is understood and achieved. It will analyze progress as a dominant narrative of history, examine its various implications, and investigate how it correlates with the idea of democracy.

Keywords: Societal narrative, progress, justice, social movements

1. Introduction

If the contemporary moment has a broad, defining narrative, it may be that of progress. From Steven Pinker's claims in popular nonfiction, and in the New York Times Opinion page, that "Human progress is an empirical fact" to the quote from Martin Luther King Jr. woven into a rug in Barack Obama's White House: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," to the latent optimism embedded in the steadfast belief in an ever-growing GDP, the idea of progress is so publicly and internally reinforced it can be difficult to think through just what it means. This paper is an attempt to do precisely that.

In short, it will seek to investigate and unpack progress as a dominant narrative of history, what its ideological implications are, and how it relates to and intertwines with the idea of democracy. From the contemporary perspective, the history of social justice is filled with complicated movements involving a series of steps contributing to societal progress. In other words, from this perspective, the resulting ideology is the combined result of a set of conflicting historical narratives. This is also, in a way, how one might summarize early theorists of progress, like G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), for whom progresses towards a set highest point through conflicts between two ideologically opposing positions that necessarily results in a progressive synthesis of both [1]. Importantly, progress is a distinctly European idea and, for Hegel, the teleological endpoint is similar to constitutional monarchy—conveniently, in Hegel's time, the ruling government type of Western Europe—just as for the thinkers

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who came after him, like John Stuart Mill, and for the contemporary moment, too, in thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, the teleological endpoint is necessarily something like liberal democracy [1]. To analyze the idea of progress, this paper will discuss four global movements from a liberal democratic perspective and, in so doing, examine the idea that social change comes about through changes to the societal narrative, akin to a debate of ideas unfolding on a senate floor. This paper will characterize changes in the societal narrative as large-scale awareness-raising events such as conferences, well-publicized speeches, literature and media, live or virtual protests, and changes in global policies and laws that support social movements.

2. Feminism and Feminist Movements

The paper will begin by discussing the trajectory of feminism and feminist movements. The origins of feminist theory can be dated back to the works of Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Jane Austen (d. 1817), or Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792) [2]. Feminist thought and change are often divided into four waves. The first wave began in the late nineteenth century. Many historians see the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in New York State as one of the most notable events of the first wave [3]. The convention hosted discussions that rallied for gender equality and women's suffrage rights and against the "cult of domesticity", a specific set of values and roles for women. It was attended by primarily Western, middle-class women, and the equality of sexes before the law, but marked the start of narrative change and the beginning of broader public consciousness within the United States towards gender equality. The second wave widened to better include women of color and developing nations, and raised awareness around reproductive rights, workplace equality, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. One of the most influential figures of the second wave was Betty Friedan, whose book The Feminine Mystique in 1963 described women's dissatisfaction with prevailing assumptions that women are bound to housework, marriage, and childbearing. The Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, which was first proposed in 1923 and still remains under discussion, would guarantee gender equality, an explicit, legislative, change in narrative, representing an ongoing strived-for benchmark of liberal feminist progress [4]. The third wave saw protests against a sexist patriarchy, in which feminine beauty was restrained by a concept of "universal womanhood" [5]. Strong female role models progressed the discourse in all forms of media, such as Disney's 1998 movie Mulan, and embraced the idea of representation as a way of furthering and controlling the broader social discourse [5]. The fourth, current wave speaks to intersectionality and the oppression of other groups or genders, viewing feminism as part of a larger pattern of global marginalization [2].

From the position examined by this paper, in terms of addressing gender inequality, the West has consistently experienced more visible strides in policies and laws. Likewise, the broader social narrative around gender in Western countries has changed significantly over the past century. For example, in 2021 the US highlighted the need to continue the change in attitude by creating the White House Gender Policy Council and the official National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, supporting President Biden's idea that "all of us can have a better future when women and girls can reach their full potential" [6]. At this point, such a statement is an extremely popular and common sentiment in public discourse. However, it is important to also note the limitations this position has thus far been unable to overcome—for instance, the 2022 reversal of the 1973 Roe vs Wade case that gave women the right to abortion [7]. One might note this as a moment of potential dialectical change—that for a narrative to proceed into its next phase, it must also accommodate its opposite in some way.

Nevertheless, this debate remains limited somewhat to a largely Western construct. In many non-Western countries, women have had less opportunity to protest and affect change, and women's rights are often in different places on a continuum of progress. Women still have extremely limited voting

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autonomy and are subject to sexism and fundamental freedom constraints in many countries, including Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uganda, and Kenya [8]. In large parts of the Muslim world, family laws continue to reflect women as second-class citizens, with male-dominated kinship and property systems [9]. Nonetheless, if one take this position and assume that a change in narrative is indeed the first step towards meaningful change, it can be said that most countries have made progress and shifted some amount of dialogue around women's rights. For example, the 2006 African Feminist Forum in Ghana was a place for African feminist activists to discuss issues relating to women's rights in Africa [10]. As such, one can begin to apprehend what position in a continuum these activists find themselves working against. Until the narrative—or liberal democracy itself—proliferates as a governing structure globally, change will continue to be a slow and uneven process.

3. Racial Equality

If questions of gender equality can be said to show a reasonably satisfying trajectory trending towards equity within liberal democracies, does the same play out for racial equality? Racism has existed for a very long time; however, one can argue that the current forms of racism are firmly rooted in colonialism, with modern conceptions of race emerging out of systems of religious and ethnic categorization and repression in places like Reniassance-era Spain and through the transatlantic slave trade and resource extraction in European colonies in the Americas [11]. Therefore, it will be helpful to consider the degree to which anti-racism efforts have stemmed from changes in the broader social narrative. Can one say, for instance, that the end of slavery in the United States was preceded by a change in narrative? Or was it a wartime decision made by the mounting material pressures of the need for a Union victory in the American Civil War? In either case, once the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, the idea of abolition eventually became a Union victory and ultimately the abolition of slavery in 1865 in the United States with the 13th Amendment [12]. Interestingly, France was one of the first countries to officially challenge conventional beliefs by abolishing slavery in 1794 during the French Revolution, a time when citizens were protesting for equality and indeed one of the birthplaces of liberal democracy. While Napoleon reinstated the practice, it was subsequently abolished again in 1845 [13]. Since this point, from the 1800s until today, nations have been widely enacting laws to attempt to eliminate global slavery. An excellent example is that in 2015, all members of the United Nations unanimously adopted a goal to end all forms of slavery by 2030, showing a clear collective effort to address this issue. However, many countries continue to lack laws to "prosecute, convict and punish people for subjecting people to the most extreme forms of exploitation" such as forced labor, human trafficking, or debt bondage [14]. The failure to criminalize slavery highlights, on the one hand, the substantial room for legislative growth, and, on the other, the limitations potentially endemic to using a system initially founded and built upon racial subjugation to end racial subjugation.

The end of Apartheid in South Africa might be taken as a more contemporary example. The anti-Apartheid movement made successful progress via the South African legal system. Previously, in South Africa, non-white people were subjected to the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified South Africans based on race, and the Group Areas Act of 1950, which separated business and residential areas for different races and banned thousands of others from "white" areas [15]. During Nelson Mandela's initial protests against apartheid, South African leaders were resistant to change and imprisoned him. However, since Mandela's release, significant progress has occurred. Apartheid was banned in the early 1990s and Mandela rose to become the first black president in South Africa in 1994. Still, the root of the problem—the colonial structures that institutionalized racism—remains viscerally present. Racial inequality persists deeply in South Africa and in many places around the world in the form of less direct discrimination, often seen in job opportunities and income. While increased dialogue around race in postcolonial society is undoubtedly needed, one

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again simultaneously run into potential limitations around what dialogue can achieve within structures antagonistic to certain outcomes due to their history.

Given that colonialism is a basis for both contemporary questions of racism and liberal democracy, it is also deeply important to consider racial prejudice against Indigenous peoples, who have borne the brunt of the history of colonialism. From this lens, one can see the limitations and Eurocentrism of this mode of social change. While there have been valiant efforts by Indigenous rights movements and they have been consistently successful at changing narratives around the oppression of Indigenous populations, abhorrent treatment of Indigenous peoples by postcolonial countries continues to this day. There have been consistent statements and acknowledgements suggesting a broad change in narrative, such as the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights [16], the increasingly widespread use of land acknowledgments in public events across the Americas, as well as formal legislative changes from governments such as the ninety-four recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to address the historical and ongoing impacts of residential school system abuse [17]. In addition, the Canadian government attempts to improve education and healthcare in Indigenous communities, as well as assist in preserving the language and culture of Indigenous peoples. However, it remains the case that one in four Indigenous people and four in ten Indigenous children in Canada live in poverty and that there are Indigenous communities without access to healthy drinking water [18]. These rates are similar, if not worse, for Indigenous populations in the United States and in Australia.

The current understanding of progress is not comprehensive. After all, thinkers like Hegel or Mill, who were major architects behind this paradigm, would not have seen a contradiction between liberal democracy and colonialism or slavery [1]. Indeed, the narrative of progress cannot escape being associated with abhorrent views around race and the material enrichment that came from the colonial exploitation and subjugation those views were used to justify. When enslaved peoples gained their freedom, they did not automatically gain equality, and the degree to which that freedom is meaningfully free is disputable. Likewise, after centuries of genocide, Indigenous populations continue to be subjected to enforced conditions of despair and cultural erasure which is not fully possible to feel or understand from the outside. Still, according to this ideological position of progress, the change in the global narrative around questions of supposed racial difference remains a first step towards racial equality because the enslavement of others is no longer outwardly justified and the global narrative supports increased equity.

4. LGBTQ+ Rights

Similar to movements seeking gender and racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights movements aim to challenge traditional societal norms by addressing social, legal, and cultural aspects that require change. One's sexual orientation is comparatively easy to hide, so it is helpful to gauge the extent of progress in this movement to see if narrative can effectively drive progress. Oppression of LGBTQ+ people has long been entrenched in societal attitudes and they have historically faced discrimination in the workplace as well as in the judicial system. LGBTQ+ rights have only recently changed in some Western countries and the disparities in LGBTQ+ protection laws again place different regions at different stages of a potential continuum. The Netherlands was the first to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001 [19]. Since then, around 20% of the world's countries have followed in legalizing same-sex marriage [20]. Although same-sex marriage and adoption are legal in the United States, the status of LGBTQ+ people is extremely divisive across the different states themselves. For instance, Tennessee passed an anti-drag law this spring and anti-LGBTQ+ outrage continues to be a consistent flashpoint in the American culture war [21]. Outside of the West, countries are often even more extreme in their mistreatment of LGBTQ+ communities, demonstrating that, in large parts of the world, neither reality nor narrative has significantly changed. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni,

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for instance, recently passed a new law that includes a death sentence for "aggravated homosexuality" [22]. Though the United Nations Human Rights Council has passed several resolutions protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation, they have been far from unanimous votes [23]. Progress, therefore, remains uneven.

5. Liberal Democracy

Ultimately, this paper is led to discuss the idea of democracy itself. One of the oldest forms of democracy was practiced in ancient Athens, and centuries later, there came about two of the most famous movements to promote democracy: the American and French Revolutions. Still, these movements were incomplete—while the American Declaration of Independence stated that all men are equal, it did not allow women, enslaved people, and other marginalized groups of people the right to vote. Nevertheless, on a legislative level, many of these deficiencies have been rectified in contemporary liberal democracies across the globe. While the effectiveness of voting rights may be contested, the status of the right to vote is now widely protected.

From the vantage point of progress, liberal democracy is, in a way, necessarily synonymous with all other movements for social change. When a country embraces democracy, it also makes strides—even if only in appearance—toward reducing prejudice. As such, in theory, democracy encourages equality and discourages oppression, and in various parts of the world without democracy, there is a disproportionate number of oppressed groups. However, democracy is not perfect anywhere, and in many countries, the power of citizens is diminished through voter suppression and falsification of election results [24]. For instance, while Russia successfully held its first election in 1993, the attempted transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy was not complete—public opinion, media, and political parties are manipulated by powerful individuals so that election outcomes are always predetermined [25]. The extent to which similar happenings also occur within countries in the West is hotly contested. Still, in the merit of democracy itself, if one is to understand changing narratives as an indicator of social change, even the attempt to appear democratic can potentially be seen as a benchmark for progress.

What is striking is the extent of truthfulness in the idea that democracy can be the only option for a population to have a voice and yet, at the same time, be fundamentally dependent on the same oppression and inequality that it seeks to ameliorate. Why, for instance, is the black majority of South Africa unable to vote away the staggering racial wealth gap that leaves it one of the most economically polarized countries in the world? Why do Americans not vote in policies which are overwhelmingly popular, like socialized medicine, paid maternity leave, or government funding for childcare? There are few satisfying answers to these questions, and humanity is again faced with the legacy on which liberal democracy is founded. Those in the West are wedded to democracy, and yet it has a history of slavery, genocide, and exploitation. While one might say that there has been progress, the question of the past still looms over us.

6. Conclusion

Is this progress what Mill or Hegel might have imagined? Is that a desired progress? The answer, inevitably, is yes, in ways that are good and in ways that are bad, that progress can be seen, even in this world built and governed by systems formed through conditions of violence. Humanity holds on to a flame of hope that the sense of peace felt by those who are lucky enough to experience it, however flawed and disfigured, might still spread to more and more people. Humanity holds onto this hope because it may not, at least, be more false than it is true.

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