

Applied Sociology Thematic Group

For those who work outside University

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Progress?

Last Tuesday, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) published "Measures of Australia's Progress". The data is said to help Australians address the question, 'Is life in Australia getting better?' The ABS suggests that 'progress' has been made, compared with ten years ago, in health, education, training, work, national income, national wealth and household economic wellbeing. Areas that have regressed, compared with ten years ago, are: productivity, biodiversity and the atmosphere.

Classical sociology was full of the idea of 'progress'. Progress meant change and this was seen as providing everlasting improvement to the human condition. It was born amid the acceptance of evolution, and saw growth and development as an inevitable and irreversible unravelling of inherent potentialities of society. Change was seen as having positive value in itself. It was always good, to be sought after and cherished for its own sake.

This understanding lasted into the 20th century and at some levels into the 21st where we find politicians still using 'progress' in its 19th century understanding. However, in the wider community people may no longer be convinced that 'progress' has any social meaning. Doubts about the validity of 'progress', emerged soon after the idea was first put forward and the idea has continued to be undermined. One challenge to the idea comes from the political use of the 'recurring crisis' as identified by Alexander & Sztompka (1990). Elsewhere, Sztompka (2000:6) has argued that what are considered to be 'progressive' processes, do not run in a smooth, linear fashion, but rather through temporary breakdowns, backlashes, even lasting reversals. As the changes expand and deepen, it can be seen, ever more clearly, that any declared 'progress', does not develop in a uniform manner in all areas of social life. Processes which can be judged as 'progressive' in some domains are found to produce various adverse side effects, and unintended consequences, in others. A focus on 'crisis' as the price of change, can be illustrated by well-known sociological themes initiated in the 19th century which still permeate sociological thought. Sztompka identifies these as: the lost community raised by Ferdinand Tönnies. The idea of moral chaos; emphasised by Emile Durkheim. The issues of bureaucracy raised by Max Weber. In the 20th C. the reality of decaying mass culture and the dangers of massification raised by José Ortega Y Gasset. The industrialization of war, ecological destruction, degradation of nature, the depletion of resources, the preaching of genocide, the spread of terrorism and local violence (2000:6).

The word 'progress' is defined (COD) as "forward or onward movement towards a destination". If this is what we mean, what is our destination? A second definition uses the word to mean "development towards a better, more complete or more modern condition".

Neither definition seems to fit what ABS is doing. In 1987 Bob Hawk made his famous declaration that "By 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty. Today (15/10/12) ACOSS announced that 2.2 million people in Australia live below the poverty line. That does not sound like progress to me.

Sztompka (2000) also identifies a further defect in the idealization of progress and fetishization of change, in that changes are never equally and unequivocally good for all members of society. He also asks the question 'for whose benefit is this 'progress' made and, raises the question 'who pays for this progress?' which has been taken up by numerous later authors who point to injustice, inequality. Sztompka's main argument is that the study of society should not be wasted on identifying different types of change, but concentrated on the 'effects' of change. To emphasise this he identifies 'social trauma' as the consequence of change. He argues it is an appropriate word to borrow from the medical and psychiatric vocabulary, because it makes sense of the consequences of social change. As applied to society, trauma is generated by making changes and it affects individuals and communities alike bring shocks and wounds to the social and cultural tissue.

Just identifying that we are in a period of economic or technological change when more and more people are being retrenched or retired does nothing to identify the effects of this change on society. It does not identify that this change has an unequal influence on the various components of society, nor does it have an inevitable impact or necessarily any impact on all sections of society. Change generates harrowing experience for some and the achievement of some goal for others. However, when progress is claimed, we need to ask who is it for? But more importantly, what does it do for those it does not reach.

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Measures of Australia's Progress: Summary Indicators, 2012 , ABS Publication released 09/10/2012

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