

Saying yes without saying yes to progress: comments on David Livingstone's 2005 *Progress in Human Geography* lecture

Trevor J. Barnes*

Department of Geography, 1984 West Mall, University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada

Reading David Livingstone's paper reminded me of Ian McEwan's (2005) recent novel, *Saturday*. Set in London, post-Afghanistan, pre-Iraq, Hans Blix bleating in the background, anti-war demonstrators marching down Tottenham Court Road, the protagonist, Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon at University College Hospital, is torn between his belief in progress and the grisly events he sees not only on TV and in the newspapers, but on the streets of London, and, in the climactic conclusion, in his own home.

Driving his 'silver Mercedes S500 with cream upholstery' in Bloomsbury, listening to Schubert on yet another of the age's 'wondrous machines', Henry quotes Peter Medawar to himself: 'To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind' (McEwan, 2005: 75, 77). But all around him, outside the car, is evidence of the age's regress – torture victims, terrorism, genocide, war.

By the end of *Saturday*, Henry is less confident of progress. The term is too large and all encompassing, too abstract and too sure of itself, to cover the complications, messiness,

and contradictions of lives lived, even Henry's own seemingly virtuous and ordered life.

It seems to me that David's paper traces the opposite arc in its line of argument. It begins with complications, messiness and contradictions, but ends trying to assert something bigger and superordinate, something exceeding life itself. I think this is a mistake. The problem is that David wants to have his cake and eat it. He wants to celebrate the importance of the local, its contingency, variety, and concreteness. I take that to be at the heart of his larger project of 'geographies of knowledge' of which he says his present paper is a contribution (see also Livingstone, 2002; 2003). But at the same time he wants to go beyond the local, to say something more general, more definitive, and more lasting, something that surpasses the fleeting here and now, the contingent there and then. To do so he wants to judge and compare across different local contexts. He wants the security of knowing progress is possible. If not, he implies, barbarians will soon be at the gates.

While I disagree strongly with the conclusion, I want to begin by acknowledging the

*Email: tbarnes@geog.ubc.ca

elegance, creativity, and sophistication of the paper, as well as its formidable scholarship. The paper was a great pleasure to read. Equally, it was a great pleasure to hear David's wonderful delivery in mellifluous tenor Irish brogue at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS). This imposing Victorian red-brick building at the end of Exhibition Road was the perfect venue given it has been so often the place from which British geographical expeditions seeking progress convened and set out.¹ 'The history of the RGS enshrines such famous names as Livingstone, Stanley, Scott, Younghusband, Shackleton, Hunt and Hillary', as the RGS website has it, many of whom were precisely in the Progress business (<http://www.rgs.org/>).

The most impressive part of the paper for me was the idea of a double geography of progress. As David deftly illustrates using his five case studies, geographers throughout the Enlightenment imbued progress with a geography: Jedidiah Morse's idea of 'an inexorable progressive movement from East to West' across the United States (Livingstone, 2005: 5); John Pinkerton's selected spaces of civilization and based on his racial bigotry, prejudice and intolerance; Petr Kropotkin's thesis of mutual aid to be realized in part by the teaching of a progressive geography; 'The Gang of Four's' original conception of this journal predicated on the general progress attending the unity of human and physical sciences; and David Smith's (2000: 2) moral geography of progress and set against 'the coal-face of human misery' the location of which admits neither 'ambiguity' nor 'uncertainty'. But, in turn, those geographies were underpinned by yet other geographies: Morse's location on the East Coast of the Early Republic; Pinkerton's imbibing of rationalism in the refined lowlands of (Gothic!) Scotland; Kropotkin's saturation in a vibrant late-nineteenth century St Petersburg intellectual culture; the Gang of Four's own academic geographies of 'truth spots' and 'heterotopias;' and David Smith's searing experience studying the Black Townships of

1970s apartheid Johannesburg. It is in this double geography that we see the inconsistencies, hesitations, disarray, and convolutions of lives, ideas, and their imbrications in particular times and places. We also see the difficulty of asserting any notion of progress, of asserting some Archimedean point that lies above the world allowing judgment to be rendered.

But it is some version of this Archimedean point that I think David in the last part of his paper seeks to locate. He would likely deny it. He says the kind of progress he wants is with a lower case 'p', and not the upper case kind of Progressivism (Livingstone, 2005: 17). It is a 'partial', 'local', 'chastened', and 'piecemeal' progress, and not absolute, universal, bold, and all at once (Livingstone, 2005: 17, 19). I am not convinced that such a small 'p' form of progress exists, however, and it seems to me that, as in David's paper, such a conception quickly slides into the big 'P' form in spite of his good intentions. I think it is best to drop talk of progress altogether. To hanker after some version of it is more trouble than it is worth. Joseph Schumpeter in a different context talked about the need to face life 'unflinchingly'. I think we need to face life unflinchingly without progress.

Progress as an idea requires some means of assessment to ascertain whether change has been good (progress) or bad (regress). That might be couched in terms of rationality, moral values, or even aesthetic form. Without such criteria, there is no benchmark for evaluation. It is not clear to me, though, how such criteria can be expressed in terms of David's lexicon: partial, local, chastened, and piecemeal. What does a partial criterion of progress look like or a local one?

Certainly, in a given time and place, in a given local context, one can set out criteria for progress. But if those criteria themselves are allowed to vary from one context to another then use of the term progress seems at best an empty compliment to pay to change. It means only that you have succeeded in realizing those criteria that you

have set yourself. But it says nothing about whether those criteria are ones that should have been chosen in the first place. To overcome this problem one needs to assert criteria from outside the local context. But because he upholds lower case 'p' progress David is loath to do this. In this sense, David is stuck on the horns of a dilemma. He can assert progress as defined by local context, but will then end up with some form of relativism, and which he wants to avoid. Or he can seek some extra-local criteria of progress, but will end up with capital 'P' progressivism, which he also wants to avoid. If there is a middle ground, I am not clear what it is. Progress seems to me a concept with an excluded middle. It exists or it doesn't exist. 'Sort of progress' is an idea difficult to conceive.

These tensions can be illustrated from the recent history of human geography. Different approaches establish certain criteria of progress, and on those criteria local progress is made. So, spatial scientists upheld as criteria of progress logical consistency, statistical precision, and theoretical parsimony. On those grounds, local progress was achieved. Contrast the initial forays of the University of Washington 'space cadets' in their breakout 1959 scientific volume *Studies of highway development and geographic change* (Garrison *et al.*, 1959) with their work appearing just eight years later in the edited collection *Quantitative geography* (Garrison and Marble, 1967). In comparison, their earlier work was cruder, more lumbering, more hesitant. In the later one, they are in full flight: confident, sophisticated, knowing. In this sense, there is progress. But it is of a limited kind. Progress is relative to the criteria that that group chose to make progress on. David wants to go beyond this limited notion of local progress. But it is not clear how. As we know, spatial scientists were later increasingly challenged by a very different approach, Marxism, which had its own criteria of progress and which were nothing

like that of spatial science. David Harvey (1972: 6), a former spatial scientist himself, announced the change of criteria in a now famous paper given at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in 1971 in Boston:

[Geography's] quantitative revolution has run its course and diminishing marginal returns are apparently setting in as . . . [it] serve[s] to tell us less and less about anything of great relevance . . . There is a clear disparity between the sophisticated theoretical and methodological framework which we are using and our ability to say anything really meaningful about events as they unfold around us . . . In short, our paradigm is not coping well.

Harvey uses the term paradigm, but he is talking about criteria of progress. The old set are no good he implies. Those using them might be making progress, but they are not achieving Progress. I am unclear how David would adjudicate between a David Harvey view of progress and a space cadet view of progress. Staying within the local context leads to circularity, and going outside the context leads to an Archimedean perspective. Neither option would seem attractive for David.

The larger question is whether progress is the kind of term, given the intellectual baggage it carries, that is amenable to the lower case 'p' form that David wishes it to occupy. David's talk of progress as a 'regulative ideal', one that aspires to produce 'truer' accounts, and 'moral progress' reinforces my query. I simply do not think that these three terms – regulative, truer, and moral progress – can bear the weight of the new connotations David wants to put on them.

By regulative ideal, David (Livingstone, 2005: 18) means the 'aim to make progress whether or not we achieve it'. To make his case, David cites Bruno Latour's (2004a; 2004b) recent *Harper's Magazine* article (and which appeared in fuller form in *Critical Inquiry*). But regulative ideal easily slips into regulative prescription: do this to achieve

progress. This is the case in Latour's recent writings. In order to make headway, to make progress, on issues like global warning, Latour now argues it is necessary to stop doing what he used to do. Formerly he urged the wholesale opening of the black boxes of scientific knowledge (including claims to global warming). He was keenly suspicious of final judgments, chary of closed conclusions. But now opening black boxes, he implies, is like opening Pandora's box. It releases all the sins of humanity. Lids should now remain firmly on. Hence his prescriptive injunction: don't do as I did but as I now say.

Similarly, the hope for truer accounts readily gravitates into a desire for true accounts. Belief in a truer account presumably also requires belief in a true account and against which it is measured. This is the implication of David's assessment of Steven Shapin's (1994) *A social history of truth*. There is ultimately a true account of the acquisition of knowledge during the Scientific Revolution, and Shapin's brings us closer to it than anyone else yet. I am not convinced that words like true or truer are useful in this judgement. For sure, Shapin is exact in his sources, is a keen archivist, tracking down lost documents, and he does not deliberately mislead or lie. But does that make his account truer than previous accounts? Of course, there may have been charlatan historians of that period in the past, but the vast majority are as scrupulous as Shapin. What makes Shapin's book compelling is not that it offers a truer account, closer to the historical facts than others, but because of its provocative thesis that seventeenth-century scientific truth is utterly bound up with social variables of class, gender and race. As a thesis it is an interesting turn in the conversation, it incites, it stimulates, it resonates. But such features are pitched in a different register than talk of true and truer. Shapin provides warrant for his argument, but warrant is not the same as making claims to the truth or to truer representations. The latter, as Rorty (1982: 167)

says, are 'wheel[s] that play no part in the mechanism'.

Finally, an aspiration to moral progress slides easily to fixed moral values, and ethical fundamentals. There is a hint of this where David (Livingstone, 2005: 21) suggests that 'identity and dignity of humanity as a species' be the basis of moral progress. This would be the fixed point, the foundation, for a moral code. But those very terms are themselves open to historical definition. Think of 'humanity' and how that term has been variously interpreted in different times and places. And of course why stop at humanity? What about other living creatures? We can, of course, make definitions of terms like humanity relative to the local context, but how then does that help judge moral progress across different contexts and to which David seemingly aspires? In places, there also seems a suggestion that the moral values to which we should aspire are self-evident. I certainly agree with all of the values David puts forth, but I don't think it is because they are self-evident. Historically there have been too many cases in which seemingly self-evident moral progress is enacted but which is not self-evident at all. I suspect several expeditions originating at the RGS in the name of moral progress rested on what their convenors saw as self-evident assumptions, but which David and I would now question. The term moral progress has too much blood on its hands to function as a generalized hope of the kind David suggests.

There is one final point. My uneasiness with David's argument is increased by his strategy of contrasting progress with the most extreme form of relativism: that every view is as good as any other. Even Richard Rorty (1982: 166) says that 'no one except for the occasional co-operative freshman' believes that position. Critics often introduce this extreme form as the incontrovertible argument against all forms of relativism, making their non-relativist case appear unasailable. Terry Eagleton's withering satire

makes him a dab hand at this strategy. Richard Dawkins also knows how to turn the screw. 'No one is a social constructionist at 30,000 feet' he said to put down jetsetting cultural critics of science. Apart from ignoring the large number of different forms that relativism has taken, such a strategy creates a series of dualisms. This is evident also in David's paper: either progress or relativism; either regulative ideals or an anything goes deconstruction; either accounts aspiring to the truth or accounts aspiring to career self-interest; and either moral progress or a world of child sacrifice, slavery, and cannibalism.

Such dualisms, however, produce the stark oppositions I hoped David's larger project of geographies of knowledge would avoid. I think Henry Perowne by the end of *Saturday* – in fact, by then it is well into Sunday morning – comes to a similar conclusion. He recognizes that, because of the complexity, serendipity, and sheer cussedness found in the thick of things, found in life, it is difficult to use words like progress with its suggestion of a clean, tidy line of directionality, and an unimpeachable belief in itself. If only life could be like that. The alternative is not the invasion of the barbarians. Or even the negativity of Morganbesser's double positive, 'Yeah, yeah'. It is to take life face-on, courageously, and without expectation that it will improve. James Joyce (1990: 783), another great Irishman, gives the riposte to Morganbesser, the triple positive, and at the very end of an epic day confronted face-on, and courageously: 'yes I said yes I will Yes'. My argument is that we can still say yes, without saying yes to progress.

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disagreeing with him easier and more pleasant. I hope he doesn't think that with friends like me who needs enemies.

Note

1. The building that currently houses the RGS, Lowther Lodge, was completed in 1874, and until recently the main entrance was on Kensington Gore rather than Exhibition Road. Founded in 1830, the RGS moved to the building in 1911.

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