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After Progress and Before: What Progress Could Be when Crises are Permanent

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Abstract: This paper examines the shifting semantics of ‘progress’ and ‘crisis’ as key frameworks for modern society’s self-description. Drawing on Rahel Jaeggi’s functionalist conception of progress and placing it in dialogue with Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, it reconstructs how progress historically emerged as a synchronizing device under conditions of functional differentiation – particularly in science – before being gradually supplanted by crisis as a more inclusive semantic. By tracing the conceptual histories of both terms, the analysis reveals their roles in managing temporal complexity and societal coordination. While progress organizes change through asymmetrical inclusion, crisis flattens distinctions by encompassing all as affected, aligning more closely with the structural needs of a polycrisis-prone world society. The paper argues that any contemporary rehabilitation of progress must address its semantic selectivity, historical asymmetries, and the communicative functions it shares with the crisis narrative.

Keywords: progress; crisis; systems theory; sociology of knowledge; time

1 Progress and Functionalism

Rahel Jaeggi’s recent intervention towards a theory of progress is guided by the aim to rescue the concept from an inherently naïve teleology. In doing so, she continues a discussion about the neo-pragmatist and anti-rationalist concept of progress that has been revived by Richard Rorty (2022). To her, “progress is a *sui generis*, normative concept. Even though we associate it with change for the better, progress does not depend on a presupposed, pre-given understanding of what is right or good.” (Jaeggi 2025, 20) It is apparent that Jaeggi’s concept of progress works towards an

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anti-teleological understanding of social change which is able to normatively evaluate social development. Central to this conception is (1) the rejection of the philosophical argument that there is no general progress but only specific, standpoint-dependent progress (Jaeggi 2025, 124), and (2) that social change occurs by solving societal problems and evaluating the solution to problems as progressive (Jaeggi 2025, 117). Despite her pragmatist-materialist perspective, this conception is functionalist in essence (cf. Jaeggi 2025, 83–5, 94–6) and bears surprising similarities to another functionalist thinker: Niklas Luhmann. I want to expand on this similarity to reflect on the idea of progress proposed by Jaeggi as a sociological phenomenon on the one hand and to pose the question of what we can learn from ‘progress’ as a scientific idea on the other.

Certainly, Jaeggi is concerned with identifying a moral form of social progress, which Luhmann by design cannot (Luhmann 1996, 32). A systems-theoretical approach can only criticise any form of Critical Sociology by confronting it with the argument that the distinction between good and bad is in itself neither good nor bad (Luhmann 1996, 30–1). However, this line of argument is rather fruitless, as it downplays the epistemological contingency of Luhmann’s distinction between system/environment vis-à-vis the one between morally preferable/dispreferable (cf. Luhmann 2023, 17) – normative reasoning just faces different obstacles of justification. Instead, I choose to reflect on the idea of progress by using Luhmann’s sociology of knowledge. I will try to bring into focus a blind spot that a normatively impactful concept of progress faces. This is not meant as a critique of Jaeggi but rather an attempt to take Jaeggi’s claim for progress’s relevance seriously by sociologically investigating its conditions. The aim is decidedly not to confront the normative idea with moral relativism. Rorty was right to ask, why “the fact that we use the criteria of our time and place to judge that we have made progress [should] cast doubt on that judgment? What other criteria are available?” (Rorty 2022, 55) This standpoint (that Jaeggi would share), however, does require reflections on the nature of ‘our time and place’; either to formulate them as progress or to overcome them as regressive. A semantically sensitive sociology of knowledge might help with that.

Currently, Jaeggi runs into the same problematic territory that Reinhard Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* exemplified: although he took seriously the insight that *concepts* are anchored in social structures, he nonetheless treated *history* as an ontologically ‘given’ (Stäheli 1998, 318). When Jaeggi proclaims that social change is based on *crises* (2025, 108) and *progress* is derived from overcoming these, she proceeds in a similar fashion; assuming the existence of something like ‘crisis’ beyond our observations and attributions (cf. Jaeggi 2025, 101) and thus veiling the respective standpoint-dependency of crisis *and* progress. In doing so, she reiterates the problem she and Rorty try to overcome: she inhibits a concept of progress that could

claim universality. There is no moral judgement outside of the criteria of ‘our time and place’, yes – but the reflection of time and place is necessary for the ideal to be convincing. In highly differentiated societies, it becomes insufficient to simply proclaim that the idea of progress is not obsolete, because the obvious and well-discussed contradictions thereof ultimately do not affect *all forms of progress* but just some (Jaeggi 2025, 118–9); this merely implies that one’s own idea of progress claims greater relevance than others do. From this centric position, there leads no way to a ‘provincialized Europe’ (Chakrabarty 2009). If one takes *progress* seriously as *a semantic form by which processes are described*, this problem might become at least diluted.

The question arises: what becomes visible if we remain consistent and mark both ‘progress’ and ‘crisis’ not as objective states of society but as semantics that are interrelated? Jaeggi’s book is interesting for the reason alone that it speaks of progress at a time when it seems unfashionable to do so – we live in times of ‘polycrisis’ (Lawrence et al. 2024), after all. So, *why speak of progress?* As I am interested in the social conditions for raising this question, I want to combine the approaches of a sociology of knowledge, that can ask: ‘What sort of society speaks of progress?’, with a functionalist perspective that tries to answer the question: ‘What problems does society solve by doing so?’. Put this way, it is possible to extract a sense of what it means that, starting in the 18th century, society started to describe itself (in general and collective terms; cf. Koselleck 1975) as progressive, only to transition (by the 20th century at the latest; cf. Benjamin 2010, 90) to marking merely individual, singular forms of progress and today seems to ubiquitously prefer to describe itself as ‘in crisis’.

To address this question, I will first (2.) introduce Luhmann’s dichotomy of *semantics* and *social structure* and place the concept next to Rahel Jaeggi’s concept of progress to show where her perspective might benefit from Luhmann’s sociology of knowledge. Subsequently (3.), a history of the concept of progress will ensue, to see how progress started as a functional semantic in science and from there became a central ordering principle for modern society. Only then will I (4.) reconstruct the semantic of progress from a functionalist point of view, showing that progress facilitates synchronisation in a highly differentiated society. I will show that this function is put into practice in science, where it is derived from idealist as well as pragmatic needs. This allows me to point to the concomitant problems of progress. (5) I will then show the 19th-century debate on evolution as a turning point, where society went from social progress- to crisis-descriptions. A quick look (6.) at the semantic of ‘crisis’ allows us to understand why ‘progress’ seems to be replaced by ‘crisis’. I will close (7.) with some final remarks on how Jaeggi’s concept might benefit from this perspective.

2 Social Structures and Their Semantics

Jaeggi builds a dialectical concept of progress “as a self-enriching experiential learning process” (Jaeggi 2025, 33). It implies that progress must be understood not as the unfolding of ideal principles but as a realignment of Social Structures and their “second-order problems” (Jaeggi 2025, 107) with the conglomerate of knowledge, practices, and its expression. This relates closely to Luhmann’s dichotomy of social structures and semantics and the underlying concept of social complexity. Indeed, Jaeggi’s concept of progress also aligns with Luhmann’s approach to modernisation. Where Luhmann speaks of the transformation into modern society as the realisation of possibilities for increased complexity, Jaeggi views progress as “a reflexive enlargement of experience involving an increase in complexity, whereas regression would entail a loss of complexity and falling below a set level of reflexivity” (Jaeggi 2025, 132). Progress ensues as the inherently complex dynamic of events allows for the realisation of potentials of reflection (Jaeggi 2025, 135), thus increasing complexity.

Put differently, progress serves *as a basis of* and *is based on* structural complexity. Alongside Jaeggi’s formulation that “a change in a society’s moral convictions only takes place when [...] changes in entire nexuses of practice” (Jaeggi 2025, 52) take place, this all resonates with Luhmann’s core question: if we take systems to be self-reproducing through communication and through communication alone, how can semantics be distinguished from social structures? And what happens to semantics (ideas, concepts) if the complexity of a system rises? Translated into Jaeggi’s core question: If moral beliefs only change when social practices change, could a change of practices be inspired by a change of moral beliefs? Which comes first? Do these two spheres not observe one another, and thus: does the distinction itself not become problematic? This implies that Jaeggi might benefit from the system’s theoretical considerations on the nature of semantics that haunted Luhmann’s entire oeuvre.

One can start with a generalised definition: *semantics are condensed forms of meaning that make complexity manageable by solidifying expectations*. The ephemeral status of communication (cf. Luhmann 1978, 100–1) requires a system to build expectations in a way that they may infer the certainty of the next act of communication. In Luhmann’s cybernetically enriched terminology: “the change of relations is precisely possible only then, when in the time horizons of events the next lying one is outlined sufficiently fast and with none too many possibilities for choice” (Luhmann 1978, 99). Basically, social systems cannot be sustained under conditions of contingency – they need to make some connections more likely than others and then build up expectations about these connections. A world where every ‘hello’ may either lead to small talk about the weather or a punch in the face

is unsustainable. Here, semantics come into play. They are the “specific structures that link communications by making forms of meaning available” (Andersen 2013, 208) and thus handle complexity in a preordained manner by condensing complexity. Put in functionalist terms: They institutionalise particular forms of problem-solutions of the respective social system. With regards to social change, the relevant social system is *society*.

As “specific structural problems can have only a limited number of possible solutions” (Luhmann 1977, 32), the form of differentiation that society takes allows for different forms of (semantic) problem solutions. As these solutions only function where they allow for condensation of expectations, progressing social differentiation implies the problem of (expectational) unity in the face of differentiation. The concomitant sociology of knowledge takes the insight of Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, that meanings of historic terminology may change over time, and flanks it by a theory of society that concludes that these shifts of meaning can be traced to a requirement to manage a (social) system’s complexity, or rather: its form of selectivity. This is why “world conceptions covariate with increasing system differentiation” (Luhmann 1977, 32): society adjusts its description of itself (and its environment), i.e., its semantic repertoire, according to its own scope of actualisable possibilities. From this perspective the semantic of progress becomes a particularly modern solution to the problem of increasing complexity.

This is backed by conceptual historians who show that *the future* (which previously could only be conceived as ‘closed’) is *opening up* during European modernisation (Hölscher 2022). Today, this is the argument, conceptions of a closed future seem ‘outdated’ – there is something off about proclaiming an apocalypse in the face of seemingly imperturbable continuation of society (cf. Suttner 2025). When “the French Revolution [...] changed the meaning of revolution from turning back to moving forward and put into common use the word *avenir*” (Luhmann 1976, 132) it represents a massive shift in society’s perception of time. Instead of focusing on the past (*historia magistra vitae*), it focused on ‘things to come’ – and started to see “future contingency” as “a threat” (Nassehi 1994, 49). From the observation that simpler social systems (interactions, organisations, families) often rely on fixed temporal imaginations (such as cycles), which highly differentiated systems do not (cf. Rammstedt 1975), Systems Theory infers that mechanisms to process time become central as societal complexity increases: Chronology solves problems of complex temporal arrangements – and produces new ones in their place (cf. the classical study by Zerubavel 1982). The introduction of chronology as an ordering scheme for temporal complexity emerges because “increasing system differentiation correlates with increasing dissociation of past and future” (Luhmann 1976, 135). This, in turn, imposes shifting demands on history, both in conceptual terms – as in

Koselleck's thesis of *Verzeitlichung* (temporalisation) – as well as for the discipline – as becomes evident during the *Historismusstreit*.

Luhmann tries to show how the heightened complexity plays into the changed meanings of semantics in the modern era. The idea is that, when society evolved from a primary form of differentiation that used (asymmetric) *stratification* as a principle of order to a *functionally differentiated* society (Luhmann 1977, 32–4), the entire semantic apparatus changed; for example, semantics like 'nature' or 'culture' disposed of their hierarchical nature (cf. Luhmann 2016) and instead laid bare a more temporal, i.e., changeable aspect. In this light, a consistent approach is to treat both 'progress' and 'crisis' as semantic tools that modern society uses to manage its temporal complexity, and in that respect, they appear functionally equivalent (cf. Jordheim and Wigen 2018). Concurring with Jaeggi that *progress is not merely a moral or evaluative category*, we may instead see it as *a communicative device that allows society to narrate change as meaningful and oriented*. However, that implies treating crisis similarly according to its function: not as a descriptor of "objective dysfunction" (Jaeggi 2025, 101), which can be overcome whereby progress ensues (Jaeggi 2025, 101–2), but as a device for arranging social responsibility, attention, and temporal unity (see also Roitman 2014).

3 Scientific Progress

After this theoretical introduction, I want to argue that progress made its way to become a central semantic of social self-description. This argument follows the logic that progress is a semantic that became of central relevance within science and only through scientific observation conquered social self-descriptions (in politics, economics, or arts) at large. Starting from the functioning of science then, one can ask for science's use for progress and from there ask for progress' relevance for society. This ties Jaeggi's argument back to a theory of society that does justice to the inherently functionalist logic of her idea of progress.

In science, invoking progress (or its conceptual derivative: *innovation*) increases the probability of accepting *variation* (Stichweh 1990, 203) and thus the integration of new information. Progress normatively institutionalises a preference of transformation in expectations (of what is 'true'). Early examples of a shift towards this conception can already be found in the late 17th-century writings by Francis Bacon. In his *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, he emboldened "the spirit of patient empirical inquiry" (Lovejoy 1942, 183) and merged it with a concept of (progressive) maturity:

The opinion which men cherish of antiquity is altogether idle and scarcely affords with the term. For the old age and increasing years of the world should in reality be considered as antiquity, and is this rather the character of our own times than of the less advanced age of the world in those of the ancients; for the latter, with respect to ourselves, are ancient and elder, with respect to the world modern and younger. (Bacon 1952, 121 Aph. 84)

This progressivist mode of thinking coincided with the dissolution of static ontologies that Arthur Lovejoy describes in his history of the idea of the *Great Chain of Being* – this “perfect example of an absolute rigid and static scheme of things” (Lovejoy 1942, 242), which gives everything in the universe its preordained, God-given, and unchanging place. Only with its dissolution, facilitated in scientific (precisely: ‘natural philosophical’) thought of changeability, did progress become conceivable as the subsequent ordering principle for knowledge. At the time, “[e]ven in the arguments that explicitly give preference to *preservation* over *novelty*, a shift occurs from *tradition* to *examination* as the critical standard” (Stichweh 1990, 200). This epistemic shift altered science’s mode of operation from archiving to innovating.

Aside from the epistemological transformation, however, there was also a practical necessity for this switch from a static universe to a progressive one within science: early modern science was predominantly a mnemonic activity (Lepenies 1978, 16–7). Accelerating methodological and technical developments thus required a shift away from the increasingly unworkable arrangement of knowledge towards its historicization. Bacon’s ‘histories of nature’ give a good account of this by “juxtapos[ing] facts that will later prove revealing (e.g., heating by mixture) with others (e.g., the warmth of dung heaps) that will for some time remain too complex to be integrated with theory at all” (Kuhn 1994, 16). What is already indicated here is the onset of mass data acquisition, necessitating new methods of processing knowledge.

The most basic of these methods was *writing*. Within the system of science, writing (and particularly the concept of *scientific journals*) redefined the minimal unit for progress: every article is deemed progress through its institutionalised form of publication. However, with progressing differentiation and literacy, there was also a shift which facilitated science’s accessibility: the shift from Latin as lingua franca to national languages (Stichweh 1990, 203–4). With this, scientific self-observation as progressive became translatable into the wider socio-cultural environment. This did not only promote the coordination of technological progress between different parts of society (Zilsel 1942) but also advanced progress to a socio-cultural medium of expectation-management.

Because there was a pragmatic need for handling increased masses of data, as well as an increased understanding of processualism – invigorated by the dissolution of the Great Chain of Being – the semantic of progress functions as a

complexity-reducing self-characterisation of science. With this background, it is possible to reconstruct how the semantic became the central concept for a temporalized self-description of society in general.

4 Progress: Conceptual History and Theory of Differentiation

Progress derives its central position in modern Europe, according to Koselleck, by implementing multiple conceptions of ‘progression’ into one coherent narrative. Of particular importance are the etymological root *progressus* and the religiously connoted *profectus*. While *progressus* referred to a rather technical-material cumulative change – observable only *ex post* rather than as a premonition (Koselleck 1975, 354) – *profectus* may be understood as a faith-based experience of advancement, aiming to release the human form from its ‘earthly entanglements’ (Koselleck 1975, 364). During the Enlightenment these two conceptions were synthesised into a historical metaphor: on the one hand, a retrospective and partial concept of progress, especially in the field of ‘technology’; on the other, a Christian, spiritual, and individual concept of progress. This constitutes a conception of progress as an endpoint of development which is flanked by one of open progression.

The “invention of progress” (Wagner 2022, 83) as a modern concept prevailed in the 18th century alongside the Enlightenment project, when social transformation was no longer attributed to personal sinfulness¹ but to intentional action under the guise of ‘betterment’ (i.e., *profectus*). For Kant – key witness on Enlightenment thought – cultural progress becomes the product of the universalisation of ‘free’ action, which ultimately leads to “nature’s *final end*, the moral community, which must itself be the work of freedom” (McCarthy 2009, 55). This conception of progress through universalisation (of ‘free actions’ to universalised ‘freedom’) works in bundling heterogeneous experiences, which can all be deemed ‘progressive’. From this, the collective singular ‘progress’ emerges (Koselleck 2002, 229). Only when the idea of progress itself became re-detached from individual action and instead was conceived of as a teleological self-realisation of history did it attain its full historical weight.

Condorcet, for example, believed that progress cannot be prevented, because the spirit of freedom and rationality would always find its way (Condorcet 1795, 160).

¹ One might describe the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 as the last instance where this ascription still prevailed, and the subsequent theodicy (of which Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* gives a good account) indicates the crumbling of the ascription of historic events and personal sinfulness.

His cultural history (and utopian projection) of progress is interesting because it is closely linked to the observation of *scientific progresses* (progresses of knowledge, more specifically). It is one instance where the semantic of progress in its modern form begins to turn away from the dichotomy of technical *or* religious progress but instead starts combining them for the domain of science.

It would be mistaken, however, to infer from this that ‘progress’ developed autonomously from an internal logic of science – for example, as a consequence of society’s desire to *secularise*. This is a well-known fallacy (cf. the classical study of Merton 1938, 419–21 in particular). Yet, the image still persists, and from a functionalist perspective this is because ‘progress’ provides a framework that allows modern society to handle the problem of its contingent future; a problem which used to be solved through religion’s coherent eschatology. Under conditions of functional differentiation, however, religion can no longer claim exclusive authority for this (Nassehi 1994, 49). Progress (of science) now solves this problem, too, and religion observes its redundancy in this matter under the semantic of secularisation.

Progress takes this position because it does not per se control the future but merely *presently symbolises* that it does so. The future (as well as the past) is always produced as a present horizon of processed meaning (Luhmann 1976, 139). Two problems follow from this: (1) A *structural problem* of modern society, which has found its description since the dawn of sociology (in one form or another) as (*functionally*) *differentiated* (Durkheim 1893; Simmel 1966; Weber 1963). Systems Theory infers from this a problem of coordination, because the various systems – guided by their own internal rationalities – construct their own futures and pasts (Esposito 2024, 211). ‘Self-referentially closed systems’ means ‘no direct contact between systems’: you cannot “calculate the amount of time needed for political decisions” ... “[f]rom economic sequences of time” (Nassehi 1994, 55). The theoretical solution to this issue is *synchronisation*, which poses the practical question of how synchronisation is achieved. (2) Simultaneously, the problem of *complexity management* arises, escalating with the multiplicity of potential futures. Excessive complexity leads to indecision (cf. Esposito 2008); systems may respond by *defuturing* (Luhmann 1976, 141), i.e., by limiting their own future scope. For example, by proclaiming ‘*carpe diem*’, one may ideologically exclude questions about the future consequences of present actions.

The concept of progress offers a solution to both these problems – hence its emergence as a central semantic of self-description in an era increasingly confronted with its own differentiation and the concomitant rise of complexity. ‘Progress’ as an ideological impetus enables the suggestion of interrelatedness among otherwise disparate developments. It coordinates observations by organising them around gradients of increasing coherence and synchronisation, while simultaneously *obscuring the consequences of this selection schema* with a

high degree of plausibility; in an ever-changing world, *expecting progress makes progress visible*. It seems harder to observe society and *not* see progress – which leaves the critique of progress and its apparent disappearance from scientific discourse in need of explanation. The ‘obviousness of progress’ seemingly evokes criticism because *it renders invisible the inequality in distribution of the positive effects of progress* (as the critique of modernisation theory makes so painfully obvious; cf. classically Said 2014).

In the factual dimension (*Sachdimension*), the concept of progress hypostatizes the (system-internal) observation of change as ‘better’, thereby enabling systems to ignore consequences in their environment (this argument can also be found in Suttner 2023). The interior of the system may be described as progressive, and only what fits the narrative of progress can become a topic within the system; thus the proletariat has to *fight* for its legitimacy to become a topic (similarly cf. Jaeggi 2025, 37–8). The contradictions that emerge in the social dimension (e.g., between workers and bourgeoisie during the industrialisation), which naturally pose problems for a universalist progress of freedom (à la Kant), can be resolved by pushing asymmetry into the temporal dimension and thus render it solvable – as *asynchrony*: Enlightenment Humanism and Moral Universalism become capable of obscuring the perception of social inequality, which conflicted with their self-imposed values, by referring to a *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* (Koselleck 1975, 391) of advanced ‘moderns’ and backward ‘primitives’, legitimising paradoxical positions of scientific authority and political colonisation programmes (Fabian 2014).

The inadequacy of the semantics of progress for modern society became particularly apparent in the modernisation discourse of the 20th century (cf. Knöbl 2017): Its appeal for extra-scientific contexts lies in its proclamation that by focusing on the temporal dimension, there is always a possibility of switching sides in the asymmetric concept pair: in the future, ‘the primitive’ will be ‘modern’. This goes to show that only from the romantic ideal of the concept can it be argued that ‘moral progress’ works as an ‘expanding circle’ of inclusion (Singer 1981, see also Jaeggi 2025, 39) – the history of the semantic of ‘progress’ instead shows *who* and *what* is excluded if the world is observed through the semantic selectivity of progress.

5 Evolution: Progress Beyond Science

Nowhere is the switch to a historic understanding of the universe more apparent than with the concept of evolution. The term was initially used to *underpin*, not reject the idea of a static universe. ‘*evolutio*’ literally means ‘unfolding’ and was a term in embryology, “which declared that not only all species but all individual organisms have existed from the beginning” (Lovejoy 1942, 243) and are

only ‘unfolded’ from their pre-delineated state (Bowler 1975, 100). With the rise of *evolution as a theory of change* in the 19th century, the subordination of all domains to a principle of change became visible. What began as a scientific idea rapidly spread throughout society at large (Bowler 1992), and it raised the question whether evolution could complement the European idea of progress with a logical and scientifically verifiable rationale (Young 1985, 16). The history of the idea of evolution reveals how deeply the scientific form of thinking shaped a cultural *desire* for progress.

The concept of evolution is tied heavily to the 19th-century debate on evolution and Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species* (which hardly uses the term). It is here where the society-encompassing function of the concept of progress is fully realised. In 19th-century England – particularly under the influence of Malthusian population theory – the ‘right’ theory of evolution was a matter of public and scientific debate (Young 1985, 24–6). Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), marked a relatively late entry in this discourse and was initially understood by contemporaries as just another contribution to the ongoing discussion (Rupke 2010, 79). Darwin named Lamarck (1744–1829) as the first thinker of processual evolution (Darwin 1861, v), with their main point of departure at the time being how they linked evolution to progress: Lamarck saw evolution as a learning process, inherent to life, while Darwin sought to develop a theory of “directionality without progression” (Young 1985, 85). From a theoretical point of view, the latter position was relatively uncertain until the rediscovery of Mendel’s hereditary laws in the 20th century.

Up until then, however, the distinction between evolution and progress became blurred in the theory’s reception: the real triumph of Darwinism occurred *because* thinkers like Thomas Huxley and Ernst Haeckel managed to re-bind Darwin’s evolution theory to the dominant cultural programme of “progressivism” (Bowler 1989, 144). Peter Bowler goes so far as to claim:

Darwinism triumphed only because the open-ended, undirected character of evolution in Darwin’s original theory was ignored or misrepresented. The majority of late-Victorian evolutionists did not believe in random variation and advocated selection only as a means of eliminating those who got left behind in the race for progress. (Bowler 1989, 157)

Particularly interesting is Haeckel’s role as a popular public proponent of evolutionism, because his conception of Darwin’s theory was influenced by its highly tendentious German translations by H.G. Bronn (Gliboff 2008). It is well-known that Haeckel’s *scientific* ideas of evolutionism turned into *political* programmes of eugenics in Nazi Germany (Weikart 2004). What this emphatically does not show is that ‘progress’ is inherently linked to ‘racial hygiene’ or the Holocaust. The argument is instead functionalist in nature:

With evolution as the scientific semantic of progress seeping into the political ideology of the time, the problems with progress, too, became evident – as *political* problems, *observed within science*. Less radically, this became already apparent in the 19th century with Herbert Spencer. He synthesised the observations of the new-found historical disciplines (palaeontology, archaeology, philology, etc.) and concluded that there is a common law of evolution that is cosmologically valid. What he hoped to infer was a form of progress “considered apart from our [human] interests” (Spencer 1891, 9). His ideas did not hold up, but it made *scientific* dissent possible, thus shedding light on ‘the other side of progress’. Here, in the 19th century, these social inequalities became *scientifically* disputed – accompanying and giving birth to the social sciences of inequality. The *societal* relevance of the progress-semantic – which foremost aligned with the functional requisites of an emerging system of *science* – comes to light at a time where the legitimacy for self-descriptions of society is starting to be claimed by these new *social sciences*. The scientific dispute makes visible, that social progress made asymmetries invisible by replacing them with asynchrony; as societal observation became increasingly reflexive through scientific self-observation and its institutionalised form of critical scrutiny, though, these asymmetries became harder to ignore. The intense debate on evolution – seen as ‘progress in disguise’² – made it increasingly hard to make use of ‘progress’ function to conceal the negative effects of modernity.

It is now that crisis begins its ascent as a central semantic of societal self-description: in France with Henri Saint-Simon and, more importantly, Auguste Comte (Repplinger 1999); in England with the rise of the *Décadence* literature (Buckley 1966) and Marx’s descriptions of capitalism; and likewise in Germany towards the *fin de siècle*, with the advent of sociology (Lichtblau 2022; Rammstedt 1985). It is here that the crisis semantic proves advantageous over progress: Not only did the synchronising function of progress erode under the crumbling of teleology, but also the frame that had previously allowed the negative aspects of progress to be excluded from its selective observation faltered under the watchful eye of the rising social sciences. As the concept of progress increasingly encounters legitimacy crises – i.e., it being unable to conceal the paradoxes of its own logic and to mediate among divergent functional temporalities – crisis steps in to assume the same synchronising function instead (Jordheim and Wigen 2018).

I chose to reconstruct the semantic of progress in science *not* because it is the paradigmatic case which teaches how to conceive of social progress in general.

2 The slow but steady shift in Spencer’s work from the dichotomy of ‘progress’ as the *systemic change* and ‘evolution’ – in accordance with von Baer’s embryology – as the ‘unfurling’ of an *individual*, towards them becoming synonymous in later works, indicates the adequacy of the reproach that ‘evolution’ is just progressivist politics (cf. Bowler 1975).

Rather, what I wanted to show was that it was in science where *the possibility of rendering temporalized complexity manageable* by utilising the semantic of progress was established. Progress became the semantic framework that ideologically and normatively preferred forgetting (old information) over remembering (due to tradition). This form of asymmetry easily found its way into politics, economics, and, in a broader sense, culture. From here it permeated back into science, where theories of evolution were debated on grounds of their alignment to the ideal of progress, which by then has become prevalent in these social domains. This, however, is also where the concept starts to hit a wall: the political contexts for theories of social evolution prove burdensome for the underlying concept of progress as its function of selective ‘invisibilization’ cracks, as the programme of the social sciences derives its legitimacy from making visible the formerly invisible (or ‘latent’). In other words: In uncovering the social foundations of the dominant theories of (social) evolution the social sciences also called into question the objectivity of the underlying idea of progress. The next section explores this shift through to the semantics of crisis. The leading questions are: how does the crisis concept succeed where progress falters? And what does this imply for the sociological analysis of societal change in the 21st century.

6 Crisis Everywhere?

Koselleck (1982) has famously shown that ‘crisis’ etymologically is a term that refers to a moment of decision; most prominently in medicine, right before a life-or-death situation; likewise with apocalyptic expectations of before and after judgement day (618). The modern concept of crisis, however, emerges with Rousseau. His diagnosis of the perpetual revolutions in *Émile* takes seriously the openness of the future as a possibility. Rousseau links the perfection of the individual to the decline of humanity. He accentuates the quasi-apocalyptic undertone of impending doom (Koselleck 1982, 630), and in doing so, Rousseau breaks with the linearity of Enlightenment progress. This marks, for Koselleck, the pivotal shift in the concept of crisis: the term is no longer *merely* medical or religious but becomes political. Moreover, crisis undergoes *temporalisation* – it loses its ‘momentary’ character as a decisive turning point (Koselleck 1982, 630). Instead, crisis becomes not a singular event of destiny but a condition that continually refers to an open future.

Crisis evolves into a descriptive condition – a *Dauerkrise* (permanent crisis) (Koselleck 1982, 627), and thus ultimately into an oxymoron (Roitman 2014, 2), which negates its etymologically relevant distinction of before and after. In this form, the crisis concept (originating in bourgeois practices of critique; Koselleck 1988) becomes a “permanent concept of ‘history’ [own translation]” (Koselleck 1982, 627),

precisely because as *Dauerkrise* it can bundle the different experiences of social criticism. This allows to describe the course of history from multiple perspectives and in various contexts (Koselleck 1982, 626f.). Whereas progress became a (synchronising) collective singular because all individual *action* was bound to social (*'gesamtgesellschaftlich'*) progress, crisis becomes a collective singular as the individual *experiences* form one coherent history. The mere quantity of crisis diagnoses, however, says nothing about an actual 'decline' of the world (Koselleck 2010, 203).

Although crisis diagnoses gained credibility through the historicist styles of the 18th and 19th centuries (Graf 2020, 21), what becomes especially evident towards the 20th century is that it was not simply that more crises were being diagnosed, but that crises were increasingly *accumulated* and *interpreted as interconnected* (Graf 2020, 25). While for progress we were able to show that it started as a central semantic for self-description in science and from there permeated into the other systems' self-descriptions alongside the increased legitimization of scientific descriptions of society, we cannot reconstruct the concept of crisis as pivotal for any one functional system in a way that it was possible for progress. Instead, the semantic became a simultaneous and common denominator in (social) science, politics, economy, law, etc. We speak of 'Multiple Crisis' (Bartl et al. 2024) today – a fragmentation of crisis-experiences becomes the guarantor of the *crisis of society*.

The key distinction between progress and crisis lies in how both concepts handle *asynchrony*. *Progress*, especially in its classical, universalist form, offered temporal synchronisation by symbolising a closed (i.e., better) future, combining it with a universalist idea of *perfectabilité*. By semantically preferring the inside of the system as guided towards an integrated goal, it was possible to ignore its blind spots on the outside, such as rising inequality. The progressivist observation is selective in that it is semantically guided towards seeing 'improvement' and occluding what cannot be subsumed as 'improving'. It disprefers the static while it treacherously also defines what 'static' even means. *Crisis* now obscures something else. Whereas progress excluded those 'not-yet-advanced' by designating them 'primitive' or 'behind', promising to include them 'later', crisis includes *everyone* as already affected – or at least potentially so (Beck 2007). Moreover, the Polycrisis-discourse claims that *anything* can be in a state of crisis – or at least potentially so (Birkland 2010, 3; Boin et al. 2021). Thus, crisis flattens temporal complexity into an urgent present and blurs the boundaries of victims and perpetrators. By suspending distinctions between affected and non-affected, the crisis narrative creates a semantic substitute for societal inclusion. Structurally, if the system is in crisis, the system can *only* be in crisis. Socially, *everyone* is affected by crisis. And temporally, the crisis as 'Dauerkrise' will *always be now*. This allows the hypothesis that the high hopes of sustainable development are based on the semantically

inclusive effects of an all-encompassing ecological *crisis* (paradigmatically Beck 2015).

Progress works as an integrating and synchronising semantic in a society that – still very much accustomed to stratification (*‘l’etat c’est moi’*) – only begins to become irritated by the exclusory aspects of progress. Crisis is (counterintuitively) the more inclusive form of semantically synchronising modern society. Far from claiming that crises are to be welcomed or crisis-descriptions do not refer to ‘real’ crises, it is apparent that one speaks not of *Polycrisis* because contemporary society is inherently worse off than for example 12th-century Europe – nor is mediaeval eschatology any brighter than modern fictions of a climate-apocalypse. Rather, crisis aligns comparatively better with the all-inclusive (Luhmann 2013, 20f.) momentum of modern world-society. The multifarious perspectives of crisis are already on par with functional differentiation and its missing ‘central position’. For sociology and following Janet Roitman (2014) this means that the significance of crisis descriptions lies in the function they fulfil and the problems they obscure within a broader communicative framework.

7 Conclusion: The Cost of Reviving Progress

This paper aims not to present a chronological nor a causal reconstruction. The inspected semantics of progress and crisis both developed their modern meaning between the 17th and 19th centuries. I wanted to (very schematically) expand on the functional dimension of the semantics. I proposed to view them as functional equivalences in dealing with increased temporal affordances of modern society. This perspective was able to investigate the decline of progress and, in turn, ask for the cost of reviving the semantic. The reconstruction has shown that progress worked particularly well within science – and that, by diffusing into broader societal contexts, it worked as a means to veil inequalities: the scientific preference for forgetting translated into a social preference of ignoring. It was, in turn, only through science – and particularly its attempt to merge progress and evolution – that this problematic tendency of progress came to light. We proposed that crisis historically worked as a more inclusive semantic. This has implications for progress in general and Jaeggi’s concept of progress in particular.

The notion of crisis claims all-inclusiveness, which makes it almost impossible to dismiss it. Whoever denies crises discredits themselves – proclamations of progress, on the other hand, can easily be challenged (see Jaeggi 2025, 119–20). In relating them to one another without highlighting the semantic layer, as Jaeggi does, progress simply becomes a parasite to crisis; now rejecting expectations of progress seemingly downplays the crisis, as refuting the necessity of progress is equivalent to

affirming the status quo: “That things ‘just go on’ is the catastrophe” (Benjamin 1985, 50). The question arising from the reconstruction is: Why should Jaeggi’s conception of progress be better than others? It could be! By highlighting the asymmetries, that invoking progress necessarily constitutes in a differentiated society. Instead of *(re-)veiling the asymmetries* that are central to progress by binding it to the undeniability of crisis, the concept could be tightened by *revealing the asymmetries* this form of progress proposes and then making the argument why they are preferable to other asymmetries. There is no symmetric progress. The normative standpoint on progress must be to make plausible why some asymmetries are better than others. This is, of course, a tough position to take – but that does not make it superfluous, just because it is presently too easy to speak of ‘crises’ (cf. Luhmann 1984).

The reconstruction also allows for one careful hypothesis on why taking this difficult position on progress is relevant *now*, given the historical burden of the semantic: Particularly the semantics of international politics have recently changed in a way that made a resurgence of progress thinkable. The integrative function of crisis proliferated in a world of Global Governance and united action against a common threat (of climate change, nationalist tendencies, the rise of right-wing populism, etc.); it seems to fail to integrate a world where zero-sum politics are on the rise again. Here, progress might once again become a central semantic that requires understanding. If, in other words, it is true that world-society refurbishes and displays its asymmetries openly, it becomes essential to create a normative position of comparably more ‘palatable’ asymmetries.

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