

Rúrion Melo*

‘Learning How to Learn’: Rahel Jaeggi’s *Progress and Regression* in Dialogue with Brazilian Critical Theory

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Abstract: This article explores Rahel Jaeggi’s conception of the relation between progress and regression, highlighting her account of social transformation as a practical and reflexive learning process. In the first section, the article reconstructs Jaeggi’s argument that progress is never linear or necessary but contingent, multidimensional, and embedded in ‘forms of life.’ This perspective emphasizes that emancipatory change arises through crises and problem-solving practices, where gains and losses are simultaneously articulated. The second section places Jaeggi’s framework in dialogue with Brazilian critical theory, particularly the paradigm of *formação* [formation], which long framed the nation’s development as a progressive overcoming of colonial and slaveholding legacies. By foregrounding race as a decisive category, I argue that Jaeggi’s approach helps reinterpret Brazil’s history of incomplete modernization and persistent inequality. Anti-racist struggles, in this view, exemplify processes of experiential learning that create possibilities for emancipation while confronting enduring contradictions.

Keywords: critical theory; learning process; progress and regression; formation

A sustained reflection on the relation between *progress* and *regression* is of crucial importance for critical theory. Without at least a minimal elaboration on this problematic, critical theory would lose its capacity to identify the conditions for emancipation. Its purpose, after all, is to diagnose existing injustices and forms of domination in order to understand political and social praxis toward their practical overcoming. The capacity to distinguish emancipatory advances from regressive tendencies is thus not a mere theoretical exercise but a prerequisite for the transformative aims of the critical project. At stake here is nothing less than the capacity

*Corresponding author: Rúrion Melo, Department of Political Science, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil, E-mail: rurion@usp.br

of critical theory to actualize its diagnostic and normative edge: if it is to remain a theory of society that both conceptually interprets and seeks tendencies of changing the social world, it must account for the ambivalent character of historical development, where moments of apparent progress may conceal deep contradictions, exclusions, or new forms of domination, while moments of crisis or regression may paradoxically open up spaces for learning and renewal. Only by engaging with this complex interplay can critical theory provide the conceptual resources necessary to make sense of the historical dynamics of social change and collective action in the direction of the emancipation of domination.

Rahel Jaeggi stands as a prominent representative in contemporary critical theory who has recently placed this question at the center of her work. In her most recent book, she addresses precisely the need for a critical reflection on the dialectic between regression and progress – without which, it seems, we are left without indispensable tools for advancing the purposes of critical theory. By revisiting this fundamental issue, Jaeggi reopens a field of conceptual inquiry that is not only of theoretical significance but also of pressing practical urgency. Throughout her investigations, Jaeggi has engaged with central themes of the critical tradition, including ideology (Jaeggi 2009), alienation (Jaeggi 2016), the crises of capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018), and the development of an original and complex critique of forms of life (Jaeggi 2018). Her recent book adds to this trajectory by introducing concerns that reflect the severe historical circumstances of our present: wars, genocides, and environmental crises of unprecedented scale. These pressing realities make her proposed theme not only profoundly relevant but also timely, over and above the conceptual richness with which she retrieves and reinterprets debates from the history of critical theory.

In the first section of this article, I aim to conceptually synthesize some aspects of Jaeggi's rich and complex proposal for understanding the relationship between regression and progress, a relationship that in her view is never linear or necessary, but 'weak' and 'multidimensional'. Therefore, the first section seeks to emphasize how Jaeggi takes on the challenge of investigating this relationship in a way that is somehow 'contingent' and practically indeterminate (although not 'arbitrary'). This is for two main reasons. First, she is concerned with the ways in which regressions may occur within processes that appear to be progressive, and vice versa. Such a perspective is particularly fruitful for analyzing emancipation in a more complex manner, since it compels us to recognize that gains and losses are always simultaneously articulated. The second reason for adopting this practically indeterminate approach to the articulation between regressive and progressive processes lies in Jaeggi's commitment to grounding her analysis in diverse 'forms of life'. Critical theory, in her view, must take as its starting point reflexive social practices and the material and institutional conditions through which societies engage with and

address their problems. This ‘pragmatic’ perspective, as she argues, offers a valuable complement to ongoing discussions of expectations for social transformation and provides a richer conceptual basis for addressing the complexities of political change.

The second section of this article proposes a thought experiment, aiming to explore how questions of regression and progress must be addressed in both historical and spatial terms. This involves analyzing these concepts in light of local and national specificities. To this end, I revisit one of the central themes of Brazilian critical theory: the notion of *formação* [formation], a concept that brought together intellectuals from sociology, economics, philosophy, history, and related fields in an effort to determine whether Brazilian history could be understood as a narrative of development leading away from regressive elements of its past – such as colonization and slavery – toward a trajectory of socially and institutionally effective democratic transformation (in some cases, even toward socialism). In this vision, Brazilian history was often imagined as a process of progressive development, in which the country’s deep problems of injustice and inequality would be gradually overcome. To enrich this debate, I propose incorporating into Jaeggi’s conceptual framework a sustained engagement with the issue of race, using it as a lens to reconfigure the relationship between regression and progress. This approach not only opens the possibility of reinterpreting Jaeggi’s arguments but also seeks to generate a productive dialogue between her work and the field of Brazilian critical theory.

1 Beyond Linear Narratives

Jaeggi recognizes that the history of critical theory has been continually challenged by the demand to make explicit its normative criteria in order to account not only for the concrete conditions of injustice, oppression, and social inequality but also for the possibility of identifying, in the most nuanced way possible, horizons for practical transformation. Therefore, critical theory, as she understands it, cannot be satisfied with merely describing the structures of domination; it must also develop conceptual and methodological tools to determine whether there are immanent tendencies within existing social formations that point toward emancipatory social change. So, from the beginning of the history of critical theory, and throughout its development, there is then a fundamental question that has always concerned it and that it “cannot easily avoid: the question of the conditions for implementing progressive or regressive social change” (Jaeggi 2025, 11). Put simply, the task is to trace, within historically and socially specific contexts, the potential ‘passage’ from domination to social emancipation. This involves, however, a particularly demanding epistemological project: to discern and interpret evidence of transformation not as abstract ideals imposed from outside but as emerging within lived practices,

institutions, and forms of life. For Jaeggi, this challenge is central to the very identity of critical theory, which seeks to diagnose crises and contradictions while simultaneously uncovering the social learning processes and struggles that might enable their resolution.

However, rather than reducing these categories to triumphalist narratives of advancement or nostalgic laments of decline, Jaeggi treats them as dialectical and interwoven. Progress and regression are not external to one another but constitute overlapping dimensions of social transformation. Consequently, her work calls for a critical stance toward traditional philosophies of history and the normative expectations they often carry, even in their materialist formulations. By doing so, she seeks to displace deterministic visions of progress and instead foreground the contingent, contested, and often paradoxical character of social change. This move reinforces the role of critical theory as a practice of immanent critique rather than historical ‘prophecy’, so to say, inviting reflection on how processes of regression and progress are continuously negotiated within the dynamics of social life itself. The notion of unbroken and linear development offers only a “limited guidance for interpreting social change”, as it fails to capture the complex interplay of gains and losses that accompany historical development. “What it misses”, as Jaeggi emphasizes, is that “every achievement brings with it moments of forgetting and unlearning” (Jaeggi 2025, 9). Progress, understood in this way, is not merely the straightforward acquisition of knowledge, rights, or social capacities, but a dynamic process in which advances may simultaneously erode prior achievements or render previous solutions inaccessible. The enrichment of practices or skills, for instance, can involve the abandonment of alternative forms of knowledge or modes of social organization, and problems once thought resolved may resurface in altered forms: “If progress is not just a linear forward march to a preestablished, positively valued end-state but an enrichment process, then regression is not just a linear step backward but a relapse behind an already attained position.” (Jaeggi 2025, 137) This reframing advances a more dialectical account of social transformation, one that highlights the persistent risks, structural tensions, and deep-seated contradictions that inevitably accompany emancipatory change.

For Jaeggi, then, progress is not a cumulative trajectory but a “self-enriching experiential learning process” (Jaeggi 2025, 136) for finding solutions to problems that, in principle, seems to be systemically blocked under conditions of regression, although conflicting experiences are not systemically blocked *per se*. Consequently, regression, in other words, does not simply oppose progress but generates the very conditions under which learning processes can occur. For instance, a crisis, a blockage, or a breakdown can stimulate new capacities, new institutions, or new norms. This perspective distances itself from teleological notions of history as an inevitable march forward and instead emphasizes the problem-driven dynamics of change.

Progress is forged in response to “crises management”, not in their absence (Jaeggi 2025, 133). But how does this reflexive framing of progress and regression challenge societies to critically examine the narratives they construct about their own advancement? And if regression is already inherent in the contradictions, and casualties of progress, “how can we know”, she asks, “that we are dealing with change for the better or worse rather than with change as such?” (Jaeggi 2025, xiii). Historical change, Jaeggi argues, cannot be assessed merely in terms of novelty or magnitude. Rather, it demands some kind of critical normative criteria capable of distinguishing emancipatory developments from regressive tendencies. Here, she resists both naïve optimism and radical skepticism. On the one hand, she criticizes those who declare the “end of progress,” since “abandoning the idea of progress risks creating a deficit in social theory” (11). That is why, as we stated earlier, without a concept of progress, critical theory would lose the very criteria necessary to make sense of social transformations. On the other hand, as she herself has already stated, it is necessary to consider appropriate critical criteria, since “emancipatory transformations are those that provide an adequate and, therefore, non-regressive, answer to the problems posed” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 164).

We are thus brought back to the question of what might count as ‘non-regressive’. Jaeggi does not answer this by appealing to substantive or morally predefined criteria, especially not those imposed in advance by theory itself, which would risk adopting a paternalistic stance. In this vein, she underscores that progress concerns not only the criteria of what counts as “good or desirable,” but also “how a society functions and how the conditions for changing it should be understood” (Jaeggi 2025, 13). This dual focus highlights the distinctiveness of her approach: progress cannot be reduced to end-states or outcomes but must also be examined in terms of the *processes* through which problems are confronted and addressed. To call something progressive, then, is not simply to celebrate its achievements but to analyze the social dynamics that made certain solutions possible – or, conversely, to reveal how unresolved contradictions generated regressive consequences. So, Jaeggi’s ultimate proposal is to conceptualize progress as a very open, dynamic, and reflexive praxis: “Social change [...] arises as a reaction to crises and contradictions – that is, to mounting pressure from an unresolved problem. [...] What emerges is a non-teleological, pragmatist-materialist, pluralist concept of progress.” (14) This account rejects both metaphysical optimism and relativistic despair. Instead, it foregrounds the ways in which crises trigger social learning processes that may lead to emancipatory advances, though never without the risk of regression. Progress, then, remains inherently contested, fragile, and deeply entwined with the regressive and conflictual dynamics that structure social life.

In this way, the focus shifts to processes of continuous negotiation within the very dynamics of social life itself. What is at stake here is another fundamental

feature of critical theory: its commitment to understanding the internal dynamics of transformative processes from the standpoint of socially situated agents, that is, by regarding them as potential participants in the very social processes aimed at bringing about change. So, the structural perspective on progress and regression is indispensable, yet Jaeggi insists that this perspective must never abstract away from the dynamics of social practices. Her use of the concept of *forms of life* is designed precisely to bring these two levels into conversation: it allows for the inclusion of social agents and their capacities for reflection and resistance, without collapsing into either an overly institutionalist or culturalist approach. In this way, she avoids the false choice between structural determinism and voluntaristic understandings of social change, situating agency firmly within the constraints and affordances of large-scale social structures. The shift toward analyzing practices is essential in her view, but she emphasizes that these practices are always mediated by structural conditions that shape and limit their possibilities. Forms of life, in Jaeggi's sense, are not static normative communities but complex constellations of practices, institutions, and material conditions that evolve over time, producing both "continuity" and "discontinuity" (Jaeggi 2025, 45–6). This approach also resists communitarian appeals that often overemphasize moral consensus or excessively normative conceptions of "the good life." Rather than prescribing ethical ideals, critical theory, as Robin Celikates notes when commenting on Jaeggi's work, "seeks to identify structural obstacles to processes that would allow people to ask these questions themselves and to collectively look for answers" (Celikates 2018, 142). By focusing on these mediations, Jaeggi's framework provides a way to investigate progress and regression as phenomena emerging from situated struggles over meaning and material resources, rather than as abstract moral evaluations imposed from above.

Jaeggi's theory of forms of life underlines that this concept rests on the articulation between structure and praxis. For her, a critical social theory that takes forms of life seriously must navigate between these levels in order to produce an immanent critique capable of diagnosing crises and contradictions within social practices themselves. This articulation is particularly productive because it allows us to hold together two crucial dimensions of critical theory. On the one hand, it directs attention to economic and political dynamics that exercise a structuring function, as when we describe slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or even democracy as historically embedded 'forms of life' shaping patterns of domination and possibilities for emancipation. On the other hand, it emphasizes the immanent, bottom-up dimensions of social life, including practices of contestation, everyday interactions, and forms of agency that emerge within and against these structural settings. While this perspective recalls Habermas's distinction between 'system' and 'lifeworld' (Habermas 1984a, 1984b), it does not presuppose a dualistic theory of society. Instead, Jaeggi's

framework offers a more fluid account of how structural constraints and practical agency are mutually constitutive, and it allows critical theory to trace processes of regression and progress as they unfold within the tensions of concrete historical life.

This articulation between agency and structure enters Jaeggi's concept of forms of life in a dynamic and open-ended way. For Jaeggi, forms of life are not static entities or closed normative systems but evolving configurations of practices and institutions that are continually tested and reshaped by social actors themselves. She conceives of this dynamic as inherently conflictual and indeterminate. It means that those directly involved in a particular form of life must grapple with obstacles and contradictions, creatively generating new possibilities for action from within these very constraints. This practical engagement transforms social contradictions into sites of learning and contestation, and presupposes, in a very important way, that it is the forms of life themselves that need to be able to make sense of obstacles and contradictions posed by social practices – and, moreover, the forms of life themselves must be able to be transformed according to them. Jaeggi interprets this process *pragmatically*, linking it closely to her notions of *problem-solving* and *learning processes*, where social practices become laboratories for addressing crises and exploring new forms of life. In her own words, “forms of life succeed when they can be understood as resulting from a self-enriching experiential learning process that drives further learning” (Jaeggi 2025, xv). On this view, forms of life are the privileged locus for critically evaluating the conditions for social transformation, precisely because they reveal the tension between structural constraints and the capacity of actors to develop immanent alternatives.

Learning is therefore essential to associate the notions of progress and regression with a practical and reflexive process. Social practices are reflexive insofar as they are marked by experimentation and contingent development: they do not necessarily guarantee normative improvement, but they involve experiences that accumulate over time, enabling actors to address and potentially resolve problems emerging within a given form of life. As she writes,

any given experiential or learning process can be interpreted from the perspective of the idea of progress and deemed appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad – or, indeed, progressive or regressive. [...] What we call progress encompasses not merely an effect but the pathway to that effect. (Jaeggi 2025, 31)

This emphasis on the pathway is crucial because, for Jaeggi, experience is not a neutral acquisition of knowledge but a transformative process: to have an experience means to be affected by something that provokes change, prompting individuals or communities to appropriate this disruption and make it their own. All genuine learning, then, is experiential, as it involves more than cognitive assimilation; it is

a process through which actors internalize challenges, reconfigure their practices, and generate new capacities. Learning, in this sense, is inseparable from vulnerability and transformation – it arises from being unsettled, from encountering problems that demand a creative response, and from integrating these responses into a “betterment of living conditions” (Jaeggi 2025, 3).

That is why both learning and problem-solving also refer to the importance of the process rather than the substantive result in the way subjects deal with contradictions and crises: “What interests me in this context is less the result, the realized good, than the possibility of identifying progressive transitions from one (social) state to another.” (Jaeggi 2025, 31) Practical experience is central to any genuine process of learning, which can only occur immanently within the very situations in which it unfolds. For this reason, critical reflection must prioritize the practical and reflexive dimensions of the knowledge and practices generated as individuals and communities confront real problems and experiment with possible solutions. Learning is not the mere application of abstract principles but a transformative engagement with crises and contradictions that reshapes both agents and their forms of life. Therefore, thinking about social transformation in these terms allows us to understand progress as a dynamic, historically situated process, rather than a linear or predetermined trajectory. This approach emphasizes practical, immanent learning processes rather than applying externally defined criteria, allowing critique to emerge from within the lived dynamics of social life.

2 Revisiting the Paradigm of ‘Formation’ as Learning Process

The exercise I propose in this second section is to suggest that Jaeggi’s approach could be fruitfully received when placed in dialogue with some of the central questions that have shaped the history of Brazilian critical theory. Brazilian critical thought, consolidated through the work of prominent social, economic, and political theorists, has long grappled with the peculiar trajectory of the country’s historical development in light of critical expectations of social transformation. It is no coincidence that the central category within this tradition has been the concept of *formação* [formation], which in mid-twentieth-century debates indicated strong progressive expectation: that Brazil was in the process of overcoming its colonial and slaveholding past and moving toward the establishment of a genuinely democratic society, one that would guarantee freedom and equality to all its citizens.¹

¹ The theme of *formation* appears prominently across many canonical works and authors in Brazilian intellectual history. In this article, I presuppose those thinkers who attached critical

This project of society, however, was deeply challenged by the 1964 coup and the military dictatorship that lasted until 1985, an event widely interpreted by Brazilian critical theorists as a decisive interruption in the progressive trajectory imagined by the concept of formation.² The famous poem ‘No meio do caminho’ (‘In the middle of the road’), which insistently repeated that ‘in the middle of the road there was a stone’, written by Carlos Drummond de Andrade in 1928, has often been interpreted as an image of progress interruption (Andrade 2022). Though composed decades before the 1964 military coup, its central metaphor – the stone in the middle of the road – resonates powerfully with narratives of Brazil’s incomplete or blocked historical development. Within the framework of the paradigm of formation, many Brazilian intellectuals have understood the country’s trajectory as one of interrupted progress (Schwarz 1978). The coup of 1964, widely seen as halting a period of reformist optimism and social mobilization, is often read through this symbolic lens: a historical ‘stone’ that stalled the nation’s movement toward deeper democracy and social justice. Over time, this image has been appropriated to describe Brazil’s uneven modernization as a process of incomplete formation, in which every attempt at overcoming regressions and building emancipatory institutions is marked by fractures and persistent blockages. Drummond’s metaphor thus transcends its original poetic context to become a powerful cultural symbol for understanding the obstacles that have shaped Brazil’s historical trajectory.

So, the subsequent democratization process, marked by the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, reintroduced the question of progress and regression under new and more complex conditions. While the reestablishment of democracy was undoubtedly a significant achievement, it also revealed persistent structural inequalities and institutional fragilities, complicating any straightforward narrative of historical advancement. The thesis of Brazil’s underdeveloped modernization reflects the enduring contradiction that, by the turn from the nineteenth

expectations to a progressive trajectory of Brazilian development, both in its material-institutional and symbolic-cultural dimensions. This includes figures such as Prado Júnior (2011 1942), Furtado (2007 1959), and Cândido (2000 1959), whose analyses sought to understand Brazil’s historical path in terms of its potential to overcome colonial and slaveholding legacies and move toward democratic and egalitarian social arrangements. At the same time, I also draw on the contributions of de Oliveira (2003 1972), Schwarz (1978, 2000), and Arantes (1992), who examined the dialectical and deeply ambivalent relationship between Brazil’s past and future. These authors form part of a more explicitly ‘reflexive’ moment within the *paradigm of formation*, a moment marked above all by Oliveira’s seminal elaboration of a “critique of dualist reason,” which reoriented debates on development by questioning simplistic binaries between modernity and tradition. For a systematic critique of the paradigm of formation, see Nobre (2012).

2 For an overview of the history of the reception of critical theory in Brazil, especially in relation to authors and works that were decisive in the transition from military dictatorship to redemocratization (and also the role that the concept of formation played in this Brazilian reception), see Melo and Repa 2025.

to the twentieth century, economic and political institutions reproduced dependency rather than overcoming it. The country's position within the structures of global capitalism reinforced external subordination, limiting national autonomy and shaping a path of a kind of 'selective modernization' (de Souza 2000). Domestically, political elites remained tied to forms of power, sustaining oligarchic domination and blocking efforts toward broader democratization. This convergence of external dependency and internal hierarchy consolidated an incomplete formation in which modernization advanced without dismantling the legacies of a regressive past. The very tension between the emancipatory promise of democracy and the enduring legacies of authoritarianism and exclusion reshaped critical debates on social transformation, requiring new theoretical tools to account for the ambivalent and uneven logic of historical change (Nobre 2012).

In this sense, revisiting part of this Brazilian debate through Jaeggi's conceptual proposals may provide valuable insights into the current, yet profoundly ambiguous, conditions under which progress and regression unfold. Her insistence on examining these categories not as static or mutually exclusive but as interdependent dimensions of social processes opens a path for analyzing the contradictions of Brazil's present moment: democratic consolidation coexists with authoritarian tendencies, institutional development with profound inequality, and emancipatory struggles with systemic setbacks. A decisive element in this discussion, one that fundamentally complicates the question of whether Brazil's social transformations are moving toward greater justice, democracy, and human dignity, is the enduring reality of *racism*.³ The country's persistent racial inequalities and the coexistence of formal democratic institutions with structural racial oppression highlight the multidimensional nature of regression and challenge simplistic narratives of linear progress.⁴ By framing progress as a contingent learning process emerging from

3 Consider, for example, Thomas Skidmore's reconstruction of the idea that Brazil's project of becoming a 'successful' modern society was historically inseparable from the centrality of the racial question. From the perspective of official, racist discourse, a modern and developed Brazil could not, in any way, be envisioned as a 'Black' nation. This ideology fueled a broader debate on eugenics and the deliberate pursuit of a 'whitened' national identity, which became deeply embedded in public policy and cultural narratives. Skidmore 1992. These themes are also present in the debate surrounding the idea of the 'interruption' of a modern project for the country when the military coup occurred, as we can see in Skidmore 1967.

4 Dario de Negreiros has interpreted this gap in Brazilian critical theory as a profound limitation, even when considering the most influential authors (such as Caio Pardo Junior and Roberto Schwarz) who wrote on the country's formation and its obstacles. By "excluding in principle the relations of oppression and resistance inherent to slave-based domination from the process of formation of our "ideological life" (de Negreiros 2025, 80), these authors failed to grasp the dynamics of Brazilian social domination either in their formal structures or in their substantive content. The experience of racism cannot simply be understood as a permanent blockage to learning and political contestation: anti-racist struggles appear instead as ongoing practical and reflexive challenges

crises, and regression as an ever-present dimension of transformation, Jaeggi's thought equips us to interpret Brazilian society's ongoing struggles not as mere deviations from a supposed historical trajectory but as revealing the deeper contradictions and dynamics shaping social change.

Now, the question of race is central to rethinking progress and regression in Brazil, but before addressing it directly, it is necessary to revisit a shared feature of the literature often grouped under the so-called *paradigm of formation*: the close connection between the possibility of social progress and the debate over 'revolution *versus* reform.' Some years ago, I published a book in which I argued that in Brazil, the inability to decouple expectations of 'completing' or 'fully realizing' our historical formation from paradigms of either revolutionary rupture or incremental reform hindered our understanding of the potentials and blockages embedded in different political conditions, especially in the context of the new democracy institutionalized after 1988. I sought to demonstrate that neither the revolutionary nor the reformist paradigm, as frameworks for thinking transformative processes 'toward the better,' could adequately capture Brazil's singular historical experience, which has always been marked by its own social and political specificities. The concrete processes of modernization in the country, therefore, had to be thought beyond the dichotomy of revolution *versus* reform, opening dialogue with new emancipatory horizons rather than relying on fixed categories imported from other historical contexts (Melo 2013).

Jaeggi's framework helps illuminate and extend this discussion in several ways. Most importantly, her conception of progress as a 'self-enriching learning process' has an inescapably local genesis, requiring constant articulation between institutional, material, and subjective conditions of praxis, which are always historically contingent. This emphasis is productive because it resists any deterministic or essentialist interpretation of learning as a linear or guaranteed pathway toward progressive outcomes. As Jaeggi herself notes, processes of social learning are neither teleological nor universally beneficial; they may generate advances for some while imposing unforeseen costs or exclusions on others. This recognition underscores that learning is not an automatic progression toward emancipation, but a reflexive burden shared by the participants in a given social context, who must navigate crises, contradictions, and unintended consequences. By framing learning in these terms, Jaeggi equips critical theory with a more flexible and nuanced approach to diagnosing historical transformation, one capable of capturing both the possibilities and the limits of emancipatory change. If "not every change is for

– forces that propel social transformation in a progressive direction, even as they continuously confront persistent contradictions and difficulties.

the better”, and “not every change denotes progress” (116), we really need to abandon the idea that change is not ambivalent. This means, consequently, that not all change is necessarily regressive. On the other hand, those possibilities for social progress are often rooted in rather contradictory conditions.

Brazilian historians and sociologists generally acknowledge that important social, political, and legal transformations have traced a path from ‘worse’ to ‘better’ conditions in key moments of the country’s history: the abolition of slavery in 1888, the re-democratization that followed the end of the military dictatorship, and the gradual recognition of citizenship rights for previously excluded and subordinated groups, such as rural workers, members of the urban proletariat, women, and Black population. However, many of these ‘advances’ have often been read by Brazilian critical theorists as partial or insufficient. These achievements were seen as embedded in a political system that remained highly elitist, patriarchal, and racially exclusive, and as constrained by capitalist conditions that prevented the fulfillment of the most radical aspirations for a truly egalitarian and just society. From this perspective, moments commonly celebrated as milestones of progress appear deeply ambiguous: they represent undeniable gains while simultaneously reflecting the limits of reform and the enduring power of exclusionary structures.

So, the dispute over how to interpret Brazil’s major trends of progress and regression has been persistently shaped by debates on the centrality of racism. Indeed, it was precisely through sustained attention to racial dynamics that many interpreters of Brazilian society came to argue that the country’s historical trajectory has been profoundly contradictory, with institutional and material gains distributed unevenly and systematically privileging white elites. Examples of this abound: the post-abolition period saw the consolidation of a racially hierarchical social order, a phenomenon critically analyzed through the rejection of the ‘myth of racial democracy’ (Melo 2025);⁵ more recently, even as anti-racist social movements have significantly reshaped Brazil’s public sphere – securing affirmative action policies in higher education, the recognition of quilombola land rights, and legal frameworks to combat racial discrimination – these achievements coexist with stark racial inequalities in health, income, and education, as well as the ongoing state-sanctioned violence that has led many scholars and activists to denounce a

5 The theme of the ‘myth of racial democracy’ is closely tied to formulations about Brazil’s cultural and social formation as a mixed-race society, as articulated in the influential works of Freyre 1956 and later Ribeiro 1995. Both authors emphasized the role of *miscigenação* (racial mixing) as a defining characteristic of Brazilian identity, framing it as a source of cultural richness and national cohesion. Yet the notion of *miscigenação* was also frequently mobilized to justify the supposed absence of racial conflict in the country, sustaining an image of Brazil as a racially harmonious or tolerant society. This narrative, while celebratory on the surface, functioned as an ideological mechanism that obscured the structural persistence of racial inequalities and forms of exclusion.

‘genocide’ of Black populations in the urban peripheries (Rios 2021). Such contradictions raise pressing questions: are these instances evidence of ‘false’ or incomplete learning processes, in which progress narratives fail to capture persistent and systemic injustices? How can we evaluate gains and losses when immersed in the multiple and conflicting experiences that shape Brazil’s turbulent democratic culture and its unequal political formation? And does this ambivalent history of anti-racist political struggles mean that “things just keep changing without ever getting better in any substantial sense?” (Jaeggi 2025, 9).

Answering these questions adequately requires, on the one hand, a rethinking of the assumptions underlying a linear process of formation and, on the other, a recognition that the dialectic of regression and progress *does not* simply imply resignation or the absolute paralysis of emancipatory possibilities.⁶ Jaeggi’s framework is helpful in both respects: it calls for abandoning the idea of a necessary, predetermined passage from past to future, from domination to emancipation, while also sharpening our sensitivity to the fact that within the dialectic of regression and progress lies a ‘learning process.’ Crises and contradictions, rather than signaling the suspension of reflexive capacities for action and progressive transformation, may themselves become sites of problem-solving and renewal. She offers a crucial conceptual apparatus for rethinking these dynamics, encouraging us to focus on socially immanent processes of negotiation and confrontation through which social actors contest structures of domination and explore new practical horizons.

Jaeggi’s perspective makes clear that any reflection on progress and regression must be anchored in situated political struggles and negotiations, where we can discern concrete social tendencies of transformation. When we examine the trajectory of Brazilian democracy, it becomes evident that history is not simply a story of the reproduction of inequality and racism. Significant advances in racial justice – such as affirmative action policies, constitutional recognition, and the increasing visibility of Black intellectual and political voices – emerged precisely during a period that, according to much of the formation literature, was marked by stagnation or minimal structural change. Yet the history of anti-racist struggles over the last three decades demonstrates meaningful learning processes that complicate such a reading. Viewed through Jaeggi’s framework of forms of life, these struggles

6 This consequence is very evident in texts by one of the most important names in Brazilian critical theory, Arantes 1992, 2014. Jaeggi’s analytical framework allows us to reopen this discussion, challenging the expectation that transformative processes must take the form of clear-cut ruptures or reforms that signal a definitive ‘passage’ from domination to emancipation. This is not the case; rather, we must approach these dynamics as ongoing, contested processes of negotiation and resistance, attentive to the contradictions that shape them. Maintaining this perspective means *refusing to abandon the critical expectations embedded within forms of life* themselves, where possibilities for transformation persist – even if fragile, incomplete, and constantly under pressure.

can be reinterpreted as dynamic, reflexive processes of collective learning, in which activists have not only advanced their political strategies but also developed new modes of resistance, solidarity, and self-organization, that is, learning experiences that cross social struggles:

The question is thus not whether they actually (sometimes or frequently) solve problems, or even whether they (sometimes or frequently) learn from these problems. The question is *whether they have learned to learn*. Social progress then primarily means progress in reflexivity with regard to problem-solving skills. (Jaeggi 2025, 99)

The Black movement in Brazil has repeatedly confronted crises and setbacks, but rather than paralyzing action, these challenges have deepened its capacity to articulate demands, mobilize communities, and create lasting institutional change – a contested, problem-solving process embedded within lived experiences and historically situated forms of life.

The strength of Jaeggi's argument lies in her insistence that progress and regression are deeply interwoven processes, not only in the sense that they challenge linear and contradiction-free expectations of historical development, but also in recognizing that *transformation itself emerges through learning from crises and contradictions*. This perspective points to the importance of identifying opportunities for non-regressive change precisely within moments of disruption. As she argues,

A regressive tendency is thus not only not a backward step, but it also cannot be eliminated by stepping back from the backward step. Regression is part of a broader crisis scenario that must be addressed at the root of the given crisis. If we are currently experiencing something like a 'democratic regression', the solution cannot simply lie in returning to the democracy we had before. Unlike a temporary setback, the reaction to a regressive process cannot be to rally the troops around one more push to recover lost ground. Regression affects the practice and possibility of making renewed headway. (Jaeggi 2025, 170)

In the case of racism (though not limited to it) there is nothing genuinely democratic in attempting to seek answers 'in reverse', that is, in the past. Instead, the challenge of learning is to find "modes of change within change" (Jaeggi 2025, 171) to construct emancipatory possibilities that emerge from confronting crises, rather than retreating to previously established but insufficient solutions or expectations.

Well, it is true that regressive moments can be understood as internally generated and systematic blockages to social transformation, reflecting inhibited forms of learning and inadequate responses to crises. But whereas successful experiential processes lead to enrichment and the expansion of collective capacities, we must note that regression signals depletion, narrowing the space for renewal and creativity. Genuine learning always involves a reflexive dimension – a capacity of

“learning how to learn” (Jaeggi 2025, 169) – while regressive dynamics amount to a form of ‘unlearning,’ undermining the very conditions necessary for progress. Such patterns do not merely fail to address existing problems; as avoidance strategies, they obstruct the potential for further experience and critical engagement, upon which all emancipatory change depends. Seen through Jaeggi’s framework, this understanding of regression and progress highlights the stakes of critical theory: to uncover the conditions that either enable or foreclose transformative learning, and to illuminate pathways for non-regressive social transformation even amidst crises. Anti-racist struggles in Brazil exemplify this dynamic, not providing a definitive resolution to the question of ‘socialism or barbarism’ (as Jaeggi reminds us), but embodying continuous, everyday confrontations with entrenched forms of domination. These struggles are processes of learning that expand the possibilities for emancipation, even while operating within persistent “contradictions, crises, and conflicts inherent in the existing order” (Jaeggi 2025, 171). They remind us that progress is neither guaranteed nor linear but is sustained through ongoing resistance and the creation of spaces for transformative change.

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