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Functional Learning as an Ideology of Modern Society? A Sociological Reading of Rahel Jaeggi's Theory of Progress

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Abstract: The text applies a functional ideology analysis to Rahel Jaeggi's theory of progress in order to demonstrate its capacity to orient practices and values in modern societies. It examines the problem-solving competencies of her concept of progress within a context of highly differentiated social structures and shows that the ideologeme of functional learning proposed by Jaeggi could offer a comprehensive yet complex orientation toward progress due to its formal abstraction. However, this potential is still constrained by requirements of specification and the occurrence of learning conflicts, both of which are also rooted in society's differentiation. Addressing these issues calls for further development of Jaeggi's theory, particularly by elaborating a perspective on conflicts of learning processes.

Keywords: progress; ideology; functional learning; functional analysis; social differentiation; conflict

1 Introduction: A New Path to Progress?

In her monograph *Progress and Regression* (Jaeggi 2025), Rahel Jaeggi attempts to rethink the concept of progress and its counterpart, regression, as central concepts of contemporary social critique. According to her, progress must be discussed, especially when diagnoses of regression are booming, because those who speak of regression can remain silent about its flip side only at the price of insincerity (ibid., x–xii). Jaeggi thus envisions a thoroughly justified correction of current discourses on the developmental tendencies of modern societies – and it is therefore reasonable to ask to what extent her proposal is convincing.

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The following text will address this question from the perspective of a functional ideology analysis. To this end, I interpret Jaeggi's theoretical framework as a proposal for an ideology of progress in which the idea of progress represents a constitutive ideologeme – that is, a basic element of an ideology – in order to answer the question of what Jaeggi's theory of progress could contribute to a modernized ideology of progress and the progression of ideologies.¹ This interpretation clearly goes beyond the scope of social critique envisaged by Jaeggi. However, I consider it to be permissible and beneficial for at least two reasons:

Firstly, Jaeggi seeks to modernize the idea of progress in order to influence the development of society. According to her own statement, she aims to defend “the possibility of a different world” and to express the “interminable process of emancipation” under the banner of progress (2025, xii). Her intention would therefore be misunderstood if it were reduced to an academic project alone. Instead, she uses philosophical means to rehabilitate a social semantics that has a practical effect, whether in the form of social critique or as an idea that can be applied beyond science. The orientational power of the idea of progress thus forms the hinge between theory and ideology on which my interpretation rests and which it seeks to clarify. Seen like that, Jaeggi's theory of progress not only contributes to philosophical discourses but also provides information about the current repertoire of ideological semantics in today's (Western) societies.

Secondly, the theory itself gains clarity through an ideological analysis of the kind envisaged here. The functional concept of ideology aims less at enlightening a ‘false consciousness’ of progress than at analyzing its functions and dysfunctions in the context of possible alternatives.² Its principle is a functionalist form of critique that improves social values, norms, goals, and worldviews through discussing their functional value and ambiguities. Accordingly, my concern is not to disavow Jaeggi's theory but rather to sharpen awareness of its functional achievements and

¹ The ideologeme of progress is, of course, not only found in a distinct ideology of progress but also in other ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, in which it is likely to acquire different definitions and connotations than in Jaeggi's theory. It would be the task of an empirical inquiry to demonstrate possible correspondences between Jaeggi's conceptualization and the idea of progress in ideologies like these.

² The foundations of this analysis are developed in my work on Luhmann's theory of ideology (Klement 2025). It clearly differs from a Marxist concept, which dominates critical theory and refers to ideologies primarily in a pejorative sense. However, it is particularly suitable for a critical appraisal as intended here, since its analysis of ideological problem-solving capacities in complex social problem constellations highlights both the achievements and the problems of an ideology as a question of functional fit in a particular social arrangement. Incidentally, Jaeggi herself sympathizes with such a problem-orientated interpretation of ideologies, using a ‘pragmatic’ account (Jaeggi 2009). The parallels and differences between both approaches would need to be discussed elsewhere, but the evaluation of ideologies according to their problem-solving capacities obviously forms a strong bridge between the two.

problems in order to appreciate it critically. The analysis of the theory's ideological orientation therefore serves as a reflection on its qualities and shortcomings from a specific perspective, providing insights about possible uses and areas for improvement.

Taken together, the following text combines two areas of interest: it clarifies the advantages and shortcomings of Jaeggi's concept of progress for the task of social self-regulation even beyond the sphere of scientific critique while also outlining guidelines for its further development. In order to serve both interests, Sections 2 and 3 will analyze Jaeggi's concept of progress as a suitable ideologeme of modern society, before Section 4 highlights its problems and desiderata, while Section 5 finally concludes with a summary based on the question of functional equivalents.

2 Functional Learning as an Ideology ...

Ideologies provide guidance – this is the basic functional definition from which we start here. It refers to the fact that whenever one option for action or experience is favored or no longer questioned among other possibilities under the banner of certain values, norms, goals, and worldviews, an ideology such as liberalism, socialism, capitalism, or fascism is probably at work. This also applies in the case of progress, namely when we use it to express that a change has brought about a desirable improvement. “Whenever we talk about progress”, Jaeggi emphasizes at the beginning of her reflections, “we are not talking about the empirical reality of the events themselves, stripped bare of meaning, but about our understanding of that reality, our evaluation of what we see happening, and the expectations we place on it” (2).

Progress is thus an analytical, explanatory, and at the same time evaluative concept of interpretation and reflection (3, 22–4), by which the transition from one state to another can be marked as a desirable or demanded improvement. Its orientational function is therefore based on a *normative selectivity* regarding changes and achieved constellations, whereby progress provides the designation value by determining both the direction in which processes of change should proceed and which achieved states can be considered worthy of being connected to future states.³

³ To understand progress as an ideological value does not mean reducing it to an ideal. Jaeggi's concept of progress explicitly seeks to avoid such a reduction by highlighting the real potential for overcoming what exists inherent in progress (Jaeggi 2025, xiii–xix). In accordance with this, my ideological interpretation emphasizes the normative implication of the concept, which assigns a particular quality to the process of overcoming, thus distinguishing it from other forms of change in a specific way. It is precisely this qualitative differentiation between forms of change that underlies Jaeggi's aim to formulate a critique in the name of progress and regression.

As a consequence, progress as an ideologeme has to be analyzed as a *selective preference* that limits the horizon and complexity of possible developments and futures by favoring some over others, thus giving the present a practical sense of direction in its movement toward the future. By decreeing a desired course of history, progress indicates to us how and where we should move in the present, as we will see in a moment. Meanwhile, the criteria of its inherent selectivity pluralize the value of progress into different understandings of progress. Often, more concrete ideals are used to set a goal for development, for example, when the progress of a society is measured by how much more liberal or prosperous it has become.

But progress can also be characterized as a process with certain qualities, as Jaeggi points out: instead of seeking progress in the pursuit of specific goals, which are hardly given for modern societies as a whole, Jaeggi advocates a *processual understanding of progress* that conceives of it as a *problem-driven learning process* (28–35, 125–36). Accordingly, progress does not simply consist of developments or actions that bring us closer to a goal, but rather of those that can be identified as learning processes in terms of their form, which implies addressing “the imperfections, deficits, imbalances, blockages to learning, and contradictions of an existing social formation” (132). “A social change is a *change for the better*,” as Jaeggi writes, “because, and to the extent that, it is a *successful attempt at problem-solving*. It is not progressive because it moves toward a determinate (fixed, recognizable) solution or toward the good” (134, emphasis in original).

Jaeggi’s concept of progress thus concerns “the nature of the progress itself” (134), in which a quantitative increase and qualitative consolidation of knowledge and experience take place through reflexive crisis management (133). According to her, progressive movements and developments are those “that react appropriately to contradictions and crises” (137), so that a new social formation “can be interpreted dialectically and pragmatically as responding rationally to an existing crisis (or existing problem)” (138). Yet, progress is not only achieved through singular successes in problem-solving but through an ongoing, “*self-enriching experiential process* in the sense that here experiences are made, and conflicting experiences are not systemically blocked” (136, emphasis in original). Progress is therefore characterized as an expansion of problem-solving capacities based on previous problem-solving levels and circumstances, which results from the absence of learning blockages in which experiences are negated, previous problem solutions are unlearned, and more suitable problem-solving possibilities are thwarted (137, 148–57, 168–71). As a consequence, a society or, as in Jaeggi’s theory, a form of life is considered progressive if it is able to draw on problem-solving experiences to develop new problem-solving options, while it is considered regressive if it unlearns the problem-solving capabilities it has acquired and refuses to expand them.

According to Jaeggi's theory, an adequate ideology of progress would therefore be an ideology of processual problem-solving, which I will refer to here as an *ideology of functional learning*. In order to understand its ideological character more precisely, we must now analyze its orientational function in greater detail, focusing primarily on its instructive (1) and reflexive (2) functions from the perspective of the functionalist theory of ideology applied here.

(1) Ideological orientations are *instructive* when they guide our actions and experiences relatively directly. This is the case when ideological statements evaluate practices, justify decisions, or delegitimize structures, thereby setting guidelines for what we should do, perceive, feel, believe, expect, and hope for. Thus, the idea of progress also constitutes an ideologeme when it defines a relevant scope for permissible actions and experiences. Actions and experiences that correspond to the constitutive values, goals, and principles of progress, such as the abolition of slavery in the name of human rights or a redistribution of household burdens in favor of gender equality, then appear permissible or required under the banner of progress.

As Jaeggi's theory suggests, progress does not necessarily have to be goal-oriented but rather takes the form of a learning process, which means that the selectivity of progress appears more abstract and formal than in teleological terms at first. The immediate orientation for our experiences and actions may seem opaque without concrete goals, since almost anything could be invoked under the imperative of solving problems. However, the processual concept of functional learning can still fulfil an instructive function by defining a relevant area for permissible actions and experiences. As Jaeggi emphasizes, the initial factor here could be the avoidance of regression (136–8), which means, for example, avoiding border closures, heteronormative re-traditionalization of families, and a return to one's own nation as a relapse behind already achieved levels of problem-solving (157–63). On the positive side, however, post-national solidarity practices and identity discourses can be regarded as political progress in times of globalization (161). So even if the criterion of functional learning may seem rather empty at first glance, it can certainly be used to derive more concrete guidelines.

(2) However, the principle of functional learning reveals its true strength as an ideologeme in its second ideological function: its *reflexivity*. Ideologies thus fulfil their orientational function not only by directly guiding actions and experiences through evaluations and (de)legitimations. As structures of meaning that provide orientation in complex environments, their selective function also requires a greater capability to process complexity, which is achieved by subjecting the evaluation standards themselves to evaluation. An often opportunistically oriented evaluation and revaluation of values and norms thus define a key functional characteristic of ideologies, which explains, among other things, their character as *value orders*.

A framework of values such as liberalism is therefore characterized as an ideology precisely by ranking freedom above other values while aligning it with dynamic environmental conditions at the same time, for example, when previously neglected values such as social responsibility and sustainability gain importance in the face of a pandemic or climate change and are integrated into the concept of freedom in order to increase its justificatory power. While invasive health or climate protection measures have been difficult to reconcile with an idea of freedom as freedom from political impositions, they can suddenly appear legitimate under the banner of a socially responsible freedom. Or, in short: what was previously unthinkable becomes a matter of circumstance thanks to a functioning ideology.

Of course, there are limits to the reflexive variation of values. Certain values, norms, and worldviews generally remain exempt from radical revaluation in order to preserve the evaluative foundations and identity-forming potentials of an ideology. They are often referred to as fundamental or guiding values and indispensable norms, such as freedom in the case of liberalism or an intact environment in the case of environmental protection. Not everything that is possible in terms of revaluation is, from the perspective of an ideology, also desirable or functional.

The indispensable guiding principle of an ideology of progress is, of course, progress itself. Under its wing, other values and even entire ideologies are evaluated by asking which values are currently the true or correct values of progress: individual freedom or social responsibility, an environment worth living in, or the unbounded prosperity of society. As a result, progress also proves to be, in terms of values, “the result of a practically accomplished meta-reflection on what came before and how it was handled” (132). One example for that is the rise of freedom and equality as fundamental values of bourgeois-capitalist society, which took account of and paved the way for the new economic and political conditions at the end of feudalism. Yet, in Jaeggi’s interpretation, the reflexivity of values is reformulated in a special way, namely as *second-order problem-solving*, in which the interpretive framework of a social formation must change in such a way that more concrete first-order problems can be solved (97–100). The progressiveness of a form of life thus can be measured by its capacity to solve second-order problems, or by whether it has learned to learn, as Jaeggi puts it (98–100). As a result, only those values can be considered progressive that provide a suitable evaluative framework for interpreting challenges and crises, while regressive values perpetuate failure in problem-solving. The functional fit and experiential saturation of values within the context of their respective social conditions therefore become the general formula for assessing the progress of values.

Consequently, Jaeggi's theory of progress allows us to understand the ideological evaluation of values as a process with different qualities: the reflexive restructuring of value systems represents a functional learning that qualifies the ideology as progressive, just as it can become entangled in learning blockages that make the ideology appear regressive. From this perspective, the development of socialist forms of freedom and justice in the 19th century, for example, can be interpreted as a progressive learning process in response to the capitalist impoverishment of the working class, while its decline as an actually existing form of life can be regarded as a regressive failure of ritually congealed values to solve economic and political crises they themselves partly caused. As a practical consequence of this ideological revaluation, socialist movements and parties are thus urged to rethink their understanding of freedom, equality, and democracy for the sake of political mobilization and economic prosperity in the future.

In summary, Jaeggi's concept of functional learning appears suitable as a proposal for a renewed ideology of progress, as it can both instruct actions and experiences as well as provide criteria for the (r)evaluation of values. However, such an analysis would remain overly schematic and abstract if it did not address the specific context in which the functionality of an ideology actually takes place. Therefore, the compatibility of Jaeggi's concept of progress with the conditions of modern societies must be examined more precisely.

3 ... of Modern Society?

The basic sociological hypothesis for discussing any relationship between ideology and society is that the constitution of an ideology depends on the constituent factors of society and that this dependency results in qualitatively different degrees of fit. Interpreted functionally, an ideology can therefore fulfil its functions to varying degrees, depending on how well it fits the various constituent factors of the respective social context, such as social problems, procedural dynamics, and structural arrangements.⁴ The functional analysis of ideologies of progress is therefore required to examine the constitution of the respective ideology in terms of its functional fit with the problems, dynamics, and structural arrangements of the respective society in order to explain the extent to which its values, goals, norms, and worldviews are actually suitable for fulfilling instructive and reflexive functions.

⁴ The motif of fit plays an important role in Jaeggi's theory of progress as well, in an almost identical sense (Jaeggi 2025, 60–6, 83–7). The considerations presented here can thus be understood as a theorization of ideological learning progress that emerges from Jaeggi's theory.

One obvious characteristic of Jaeggi's concept of progress that invites such an examination of fit is the abstract formality of its guiding principle. As seen, functional learning focuses on the form of changes rather than on substantive goals or values. This may fuel the suspicion already mentioned that the idea of functional learning is hardly suitable for concrete action orientation, because the criterion of an accumulating process of experience does not sufficiently clarify what is to be done in practice. The theoretically postulated avoidance of learning blockages simply lacks criteria for concrete decision-making. As a consequence, only a critique of change from the pulpit of higher order observations seems possible, but not an orientation in the melee of daily life.

The ideological analysis above has already attempted to refute this suspicion by pointing out that the orientational power of second-order problem-solving is indeed quite abstract at first glance, but still has the potential to provide practical guidance through the evaluation of values like freedom which then instruct actions on a more concrete level. Its guiding function thus rarely manifests in the fact that we already know just by itself what needs to be done today for a better tomorrow, but rather in our understanding whether changes in our normative expectations help us to better cope with the problems and crises of our forms of life, and whether we should push for, maintain, or revise them accordingly. As a result, the guiding function of functional learning primarily unfolds at a reflexive level and instructs actions only through its reference to other values. However, it is precisely because of this abstract character, that it can cover a wide range of values and actions without being tied to specific ones and their contexts. Its orientational performance thus consists more in changing the interpretational contexts of actions than in providing clear instructions for what has to be done within these contexts.

To what extent does such an idea fit with the conditions of modern societies? Does its abstract formalism perhaps have its own functional value, resulting from its suitability to the conditions of our present day? It is no coincidence that an important clue to this can be found in Jaeggi's argumentative derivation of the processual concept of progress: the question of progress as a whole (122–5). In this passage of her book, Jaeggi formulates a familiar diagnosis, which she also problematizes: Given the considerable *plurality of contexts for actions and values* in modern society, a contemporary understanding of progress all too easily leads to a relativism of progress, which takes the diversity of practical contexts into account but ultimately turns out to be limited, trivial, and redundant, as it submits to a kind of context-dependence that does not question the context itself. In contrast, Jaeggi argues for searching for an overarching meaning of progress that is suitable for context-relative evaluations and at the same time reaches out to a higher contextual framework that is always in prospect (182). Since such overarching

progress cannot be found in substantive goals, the abstract formula of the enriching process of experience, which corresponds here to the concept of functional learning, finally imposes itself (125–31).

Jaeggi's concept of progress thus aims for a high level of generalization in order to do justice to the plurality of forms of life without falling into context-relativism. She wants to deflate the concept of progress by freeing it from a purely local contextual connection without conversely presuming to grasp global world history as a whole (134–5). As a consequence, her problem is to capture the differentiation of society in the concept without succumbing to it and to gain a uniform, transdifferential perspective. The processual concept of progress therefore reproduces a characteristic of numerous well-known guiding values of modern societies, such as freedom, justice, or sustainability, which confirm the sociological hypothesis “that stronger differentiation imposes stronger generalization of the symbols by which the unity of what has been differentiated can be expressed” (Luhmann 2013, 241). The differentiation of functional systems or functionally differentiated forms of life, as in Jaeggi's theory (Jaeggi 2018, 50), therefore triggers “remarkable generalizations that partly related to ‘human beings’ and partly formulated principles [such as progress] to guide ‘the human being’” (Luhmann 2013, 241–2). Accordingly, meaning constitution and social structure are correlated, which in some cases combines high structural differentiation with high abstraction of meanings. Or in other words: *a proliferation of orientation needs goes hand in hand with both a pluralization and an abstraction of the orientational symbols available.*

A functional explanation for this is as follows: in order for symbolic elements of meaning such as values to function within a given context, they must be adapted to the problems of that context. In order to reduce complexity, for example, they must meet the complexity requirements of the respectively context, which means, vice versa, that the contextual complexity – and hence the differentiation of the context – has a co-constitutive influence on the form and content of functional symbols (Luhmann 1980). A value such as sustainability is therefore used in modern politics to justify political environmental protection goals such as the reduction of greenhouse gases. If the possible goals are limited to emission reductions, the complexity of eco-political decisions is low, and sustainability can predictably closely be associated with emission reductions. Sustainability then means emission reductions and nothing else. However, the more goals and measures appear possible and necessary, i.e., the more differentiated and complex the political scope for decision-making becomes, the less sustainability can be limited to emission reduction if it is to serve as justification for many eco-political decisions. Therefore, in order to avoid an artificial limitation of the scope for decision-making or a shift to other

values, sustainability is detached from its narrow association with reduction targets and abstracted in terms of its content.⁵

In short, *abstraction of meaning serves to generalize the functionality of symbols in differentiated contexts through transcending their differentiation*. This provides us with a concise description of the problem and the solution that Jaeggi pursues in her attempt to formulate an overarching concept of progress: in order to analyze the progressiveness of various forms of life, she cannot focus on any particular form of life and its specific criteria for progress, but is instead compelled to surpass the diversity of forms and criteria through indifference on the level of meaning. Her result is the abstract formula of functional learning, which enables a more advanced generalization of the value of progress by offering a “*universalism of thematization potentials*” (Luhmann 2013, 242, emphasis in original) with regard to changes and values, since its form of thematization is not too closely tied to a specific context other than modern society and its general adherence to functionality.⁶

This is paradigmatically demonstrated by the ideological function of reflexivity as outlined above: the evaluation of heterogeneous values of different forms of life is facilitated by an evaluative perspective that does not commit to any of these values. A fixation on specific values can be considered when the number of values remains manageable, for example when either freedom or authority (or a combination of both) could be evaluated as progressive, so that progress can only take place either under the banner of freedom or under an authoritarian flag, or in a hybrid of authoritarian freedom. However, if a virtually unlimited number of possible values are to be evaluated – and this is precisely the challenge of a differentiation of social value spheres – it makes sense to switch to a more abstract evaluation standpoint whose criteria are not too closely tied to a specific context of value validity.

Otherwise, the values of a socialist or fascist form of life would foreseeably lead to conflicts of validity and problems of fit with the conditions of another form of life, such as liberalism, that would be difficult to resolve, thereby making those values appear almost inevitably regressive. As a consequence, the evaluation of values would remain stuck in mere contextual relativism or dependent on the hegemony

5 See also Klement 2023 for a discussion of this implementation of sustainability in modern societies, which is often linked to a critique of sustainability as an empty formula.

6 With her approach, Jaeggi clearly positions herself against the tendency diagnosed by Luhmann, namely that modern society has so far scarcely succeeded in developing a comprehensive societal semantics capable to combine the “*universalism of thematization potentials*” with the “*specification of system references*,” which “seem to be demands that can hitherto be satisfied only through relativization, not through an adequate self-description of the overall system of society” (Luhmann 2013, 242). As will be shown, however, the question of specification also presents an unresolved problem for her approach.

of one particular form of life over others. Since Jaeggi rejects both options, the formal abstraction of the ideologeme of functional learning seems to be an appropriate concept for an overarching perspective of progress, because it allows the orientational function of the ideology of progress to be extended across the differentiation of value contexts, thus gaining a general perspective for ‘progress as a whole.’

As we can see now, the formalistic abstraction in Jaeggi’s concept of progress corresponds in a functional sense to the (functional) differentiation of modern societies by enabling transdifferential orientations and cross-contextual critiques that encompass society as a whole.⁷ Jaeggi’s theory and the ideology of progress derived from it hence signal a functional fit and a learning relationship with the conditions of modern society. They prove to be typical products of modernity just like the relativistic understanding of progress and could therefore take on the role of a practical orientation concept for modern society in general.

4 Problems and Desiderata

So far, it seems that Rahel Jaeggi has presented a blueprint for a renewed ideology of progress with her theory. However, with regard to the orientational functions of ideologies in general and the ideology of progress in particular, problems can already be anticipated which revolve around the previously discussed differentiation of modern societies. For it remains questionable to what extent Jaeggi’s abstract concept can address the differentiation of society in such a way that it provides practical orientation for desirable developmental changes in a wide variety of contexts – or whether its level of abstraction makes orientation rather difficult. The following considerations aim to answer this question by shedding light on two problems that have not yet been sufficiently addressed by Jaeggi: the *contextual specification of progress* (1) and the *conflicts of specified progress dynamics* (2).

(1) The problem of *contextual specification* initially responds to a question that is relevant to the functionality of any ideology: how can the ideologeme of progress be effectively implemented in a concrete context of action? It is based on the thesis that the above-mentioned universalism of thematization potentials is accompanied by a specification of system or life form references, since symbols can only be operationalized within a concrete system or a concrete life form (Luhmann 2013, 242, for systems). As seen, the composition of such a context has a constitutive influence

⁷ Jaeggi achieves this correspondence by symmetrically equating the definition of progress with the definition of forms of life as instances of problem-solving. The formal criterion of functional learning is thus derived analytically from the fundamentally functional definition of forms of life and represents one of two forms of their processualism in general.

on the meaning of the symbol itself, so that in the case of a differentiation of contexts, different specifications of abstractly identical symbols are all the more likely to occur. When, for example, a liberal, socialist, or fascist form of life refers to freedom, it is usually in a specific sense that corresponds to the respective conditions, needs, and expectations of that form of life: in a liberal setting freedom means protection against state interference, whereas in a fascist setting it means identification with and willingness to follow state goals and leaders.

Accordingly, it has to be expected that the abstract ideologeme of functional learning will be specified in a context-sensitive manner in order to fulfil its functions in a specific form of life. In a trivial sense, this could mean that it takes different content depending on the different problems, solution options, material conditions, practices, and normative expectations of the respective form of life: one learns something else in a capitalist economy than in art, be it profitable production instead of refined brushstrokes. However, the context-sensitive specification harbors an even more piquant dimension of differentiation, namely with regard to the form of progress itself. It is conceivable that different forms of development play a greater role in different contexts, so that, with reference to Jaeggi's theory of progress, the question must be asked whether a teleological or a processual concept of progress, neither of the two, or a hybrid of both is most suitable.

For a hike, for example, reaching the intended destination seems to be just as adequate a criterion for progress as an enriching learning process in resource management, and it is only reasonable that both criteria intersect in the challenge of achieving a destination with appropriate resource management. The same applies plausibly to medical treatments, which can be said to be progressive if they increase the number of patients cured through better healing techniques. And even for the economic system, the provision of goods can be formulated as an abstract goal, which is currently achieved in a decentralized manner, but which can be used to evaluate the progressive functionality of the system as a whole.

The question to be clarified, therefore, is how often problem solutions are intertwined with goals, and whether functional progress must accordingly be formulated in teleological terms – for functional reasons of its own, since goals enhance the instructive function of values and principles by providing more detailed preferences for the selection of practical means. Achieving a goal such as curing diseases, for example, opens up a more concrete orientation for action than the abstract learning of better problem-solving techniques, and it can even serve to evaluate values such as freedom in terms of their usefulness. Moreover, it could even be said that only the purpose of healing enables us to understand why we need to improve treatment techniques in the first place. Consequently, the

purpose becomes the practical guiding principle of practices and their development, so that the progress of problem-based learning owes a significant increase in its orientational performance to it.

The specification through context-related purposes thus enhances the functionality of the ideology of progress. The process derives its momentum, its specific content, and part of its form from goals. A dichotomous reading of teleological and processual concepts of progress, as presented by Jaeggi, is therefore useful for the sake of a more distinct presentation of her thesis. Ultimately, however, goals and learning processes as criteria for progress must be related to each other in a context-dependent manner. Of course, this does not raise any serious objection to Jaeggi's theory, since her abstract problem-solving formalism is clearly suitable for integrating the achievement of goals as a practical problem and for subjecting it to the criterion of learning. Progress can still be identified as a learning process in setting and achieving goals. So once again, the high degree of abstraction in her concept proves to be a helpful starting point for covering a wide plurality of forms of life and the diversity of their goals. Yet the context-dependent connection between teleological and processual forms of progress should be elaborated further.

The same applies to another problem that also becomes apparent with the contextual specification of progress: *contextual reference*. If functional learning processes refer to problem solving and problems arise from the conditions and contexts of forms of life, then the relationship between forms of life and their respective conditions and contexts needs to be clarified in more detail for the explanatory analysis of learning processes. This raises the question of how the environmental relationships that influence the challenges life forms are supposed to deal with are constituted – a question of which Jaeggi is clearly aware when she claims to keep the material conditions of practices and beliefs in view (Jaeggi 2025, 68–9, 83–7), and when she addresses the complex interrelationships between different spheres of practice and belief (79–83). However, her account of the environmental relationships of forms of life and the implied relationships between them remains only hinted at in these passages. Her presentation hardly goes beyond the differentiation and interdependence of forms of life from a functional perspective already outlined in her *Critique of Forms of Life* (Jaeggi 2018, 50–4; Jaeggi 2019, 101–2), while the question of how these relationships between (functionally) differentiated, interwoven, and thus always potentially rivaling forms of life are to be understood more precisely is left unanswered (also Jaeggi 2019, 101–2; Khurana 2019, 120 note 13). A more advanced theorization of forms of life and their dynamics of progress would have to further specify these relationships – a desideratum particularly illustrated by the problem of conflicts of progress.

(2) *Conflicts of progress* arise from the simple yet clear truth that plurality often implies conflict. Conflicts of progress are therefore very likely to occur in

differentiated societies. In Jaeggi's theory of progress, this phenomenon is exemplified by the observation that progress and regression are actively driven by conflicts (Jaeggi 2025, 107–11) and always take place within normatively saturated conflicts over the interpretation of problems and solutions (102–3). However, Jaeggi does not want to get caught up in power struggles over situational definitions and solution perspectives, but rather seeks an overarching perspective (166–8), for which she finds support in the formal postulate of functional learning.⁸ According to her, from this perspective, social struggles can also be classified as progressive or regressive, depending on whether they “react appropriately to problems and crises” or “perpetuate or produce blockages to experience and learning” (111). As in the case of progress relativism, the abstract standpoint of functional learning should therefore enable an observation of conflicts over progress that allows conflicting positions to be evaluated according to a common standard. For only those parties, problem definitions, and solutions that are capable of resolving new crises on the basis of past crisis can now clearly be considered progressive, regardless of their specific ambitions or problems.

But to what extent is this argument convincing? Doesn't the overarching progress of functional learning risks flying a little too high above the conflicts between different perspectives, thereby no longer sufficiently taking into account the differences and contradictions in their problem definitions, expectations, proposed solutions, and possibilities? In other words, does the ideology of functional learning perhaps delude itself into a false claim to universalism?

Doubts are justified when we consider the conflicts and contradictions between requirements and expectations already mentioned in the previous section, which arise both within a specific context and between different contexts. In many forms of life, conflicting requirements involving different learning processes are common, for example when a nurse is expected to respond to the needs of their patients, while the sheer number of patients leaves little time for appropriate treatment. In this case, the quality and quantity of care are diverging aspects of a practical context and ideally require a learning process that opens up new possibilities for both problem areas. The same applies to the demands and expectations of different forms of life. For example, the nurse mentioned above is expected to provide measures that are effective and sustainable for the health of their patients, while the financial conditions of the hospital encourage quick fixes using cheaper measures, not merely for the sake of enriching someone, but also to ensure social care

⁸ The search for an overarching perspective is a constant aspect of Jaeggi's work, which has repeatedly fueled the suspicion that she too readily neglects the importance of power and conflicts (see for here *Critique of Forms of Life* for example Saar 2019; Solinas 2021 and Jaeggi's replies in Jaeggi 2020; Jaeggi 2021).

for as many patients as possible.⁹ Once again, the quality and quantity of care represent learning perspectives that come into conflict with the learning perspective of profitable entrepreneurship in a triangulated conflict constellation. Certainly, a multilateral solution would be conceivable here as well, such as an economically acceptable compromise between quantity and quality or a call for political subsidies. However, the crucial point is not that there is no prospect of an integrative learning process, but that different forms of life represent different learning perspectives that are fraught with tension for each other. Depending on the perspective of the form of life, different paths of learning progress are to be expected, and the (functional) relationships between the forms of life sometimes cause them to conflict when their own solutions to problems complicate or block those of other forms of life.

In short, the issue at hand here is the *problem of shared, synchronous, interdependent, yet conflict-ridden learning*. Within Jaeggi's theoretical framework, this might be described as a "dialectic" of progress, insofar as "the seeds of regression [of one side] sometimes lie in the progress [of another side]" (138), consequently raising the question of a synthesis in which several sides are placed in a relation to each other that ultimately involves solutions for all, as Jaeggi suggests (139–40, 146–7). Even if the usefulness of the concept of dialectics for the analysis of progress is basically debatable, Jaeggi's approach nevertheless raises an important issue that she herself does not develop any further. Against the backdrop of inherently conflicting processes of progress, *integrative forms of functional learning* can be seen as a countervailing postulate to social differentiation, which easily entangles learning processes in particularistic conflicts. Under the aegis of such a postulate, the ideological guidance of actions and the evaluation of values would then have to ensure, for example, that those possibilities are favored which offer multilateral solutions to conflicting problem perspectives – or, in terms of regression: those that do not betray the possibility of an integrative learning process.

However, these are merely postulates at this point, and it remains unclear how the criterion of functional learning can take on an overarching perspective if conflicts cannot be resolved and there are no opportunities for joint progress because improvement is fragmented into incommensurable problems, expectations, goals, and values. What if complete gender equality, to cite Jaeggi's example of

⁹ Studies on the economization of hospitals have documented these conflicts. See, for example, Mohan 2019, 291–6 and his concise description on 292: "Activities that are considered meaningful cannot be performed at all due to time pressure, or cannot be carried out as desired: showering becomes a quick 'hosing down,' mobilization is neglected, and instead of implementing fever-reducing measures that are effective in the long term but more time-consuming, medication is administered." (Translation by KK)

a dialectical progress (141–4), improves career opportunities for women but makes career opportunities for men more difficult because they now have to compete with women and are expected to shoulder the burden of housework as well? What would be the overall benefit in problem-solving for men? Seen abstractly, Jaeggi insists at this point on the missed opportunity for better solutions (146–7) and rightly points out that the power relations between winners and losers of regression processes can also be shown to be regressive (167–8). But even if both were to be the case, it still remains unclear why actors (like men in the case mentioned above) should adopt the goal of gender equality and its inherent problem solutions if their problems and interests do not align with it. What if there were no overarching rationality of problem-solving?

Furthermore, one could inquire into the intrinsic function of unsolved contradictions and conflicts, as exemplified in the insistence on supposedly regressive practices and values. At first glance, such a *functionality of a regressive insistence* appears to be an obvious counterpoint to the imperative of functional learning. On closer inspection, however, it reveals an increase in its complexity. A form of life such as liberalism may appear regressive, for example, when it rejects ecologically advisable restrictions on personal freedom and thus betrays opportunities to overcome ecological crises. Yet it is precisely this refusal to adapt ecologically that can be beneficial for mobilizing political support in non-ecological respects and for the social integration of its party and followers. What then becomes apparent is a perspective of functional learning that knows how to avoid, for example, an impending loss of trust or an identity crisis, but which conflicts with the imperatives of ecological learning.

The same can be assumed for Jaeggi's paradigmatic remarks on the regressive character of nationalism, which undoubtedly appears regressive when it renaturalizes nationalities and denies the supposed obsolescence of the nation model in a globalized world (159–61). Yet it should be borne in mind that the nationalist form of life and its ideology derive an obvious mobilization potential from their resistance to a post-national constellation, which benefits their ambitions for power and the legitimization of their political decisions in a way that could ultimately give rise to a new constellation that fits their normative expectations. The "factual convergence of living conditions" (161), which, according to Jaeggi and Adorno, should lead to the abandonment of nationalism, is not regarded by nationalism as an unavoidable fact. Rather, it is seen as the very crisis that must be resolved, even if this requires political violence. If nationalist forces were finally successful in reversing the current state of globalization and strengthening the belief in a natural national identity, it would remain questionable why this could not be described as a

successful problem-solving process and an enrichment of (nationalist) experiences on the first and second order with regard to their definition of problems.¹⁰

In fact, Jaeggi even concedes that regressive solutions to problems can work “at least at first glance” (133). And of course, nationalists could still be accused of regressive tendencies because they reject the possibility of learning in conjunction with the learning successes of left-liberal (post)modernism.¹¹ But if regressive changes offer their own definitions and solutions to problems and thus write their own histories of progress, it would have to be justified why actors should not pursue these regressive definitions and solutions. Jaeggi responds to this with the highly dubious assertion that crises “compel” new experiences (133), as if one had to submit to a certain course of history. This may sometimes be the case, but as a general thesis it risks to revive historical determinism. Instead, it seems more likely that the dialectic of progress can also work in the opposite direction: sometimes regression contains the seeds of its own progress. As a consequence, the progress of modern societies as a whole is likely to be characterized far more often by irreconcilable conflicts that hinder the integration of different learning advances and are instead resolved by powerful hegemonies of particular perspectives.

It is now not the task of the present discussion to elaborate or resolve such dialectical variations of progress, nor do the preceding considerations refute Jaeggi’s model of progress as a whole. However, the assumption that functional learning processes in highly differentiated structural constellations are entangled in contradictions and conflicts changes the functional assessment of the ideology of progress discussed here. Even if the functionally formalized concept of progress offers the advantage of speaking in a pluralistic sense of multiple versions and possibilities of successful progress without losing oneself in contextual relativism, as Jaeggi claims (136), it offers no way out of conflicts, but rather carries the risk of neglecting the conflict-ridden diversification of learning processes, thereby overlooking the real problems of an overarching evaluative perspective. The further

10 A normatively more saturated concept of experience, as found in Adorno and sometimes also in Jaeggi, would at this point be tied to a specific ideology and therefore be incompatible with Jaeggi’s normatively rather neutral concept of experience, which only requires the enrichment of problem-solving capabilities. And even for this concept, the regressive rejection of enrichment can itself represent the result of a problem-solving experience that finally marks progress based on the very own history of a form of life.

11 Whether the same would apply in reverse to the rejection of left-wing or liberal positions to engage with nationalist learning perspectives must be discussed elsewhere. One good reason for their rejection is, of course, the regressive tendency of nationalist ideologies. As a result, however, it seems inevitable that the hegemony of one’s own view of progress, rather than the untenable postulate of integrative learning, is an integral part of one’s own history of progress – a result which would finally underscore the irresolvable nature of conflicting assessments, even when using the same assessment criteria.

Jaeggi distances herself from perspectives and contexts in her search for a quasi-universal position on progress, one could say, the less attention is paid to the specific conditions and conflicts of these perspectives and contexts and their influence on the content and forms of learning – with the effect that a lack of orientation in cases of conflict becomes a problem itself. As a result, the question remains as to how to decide between practices, values, or forms of life when these combine regressive and progressive tendencies and, moreover, block each other in their own histories of progress.

A possible answer hinted at in the previous sections was: on the basis of integrative learning processes. However, these must be possible and currently represent a normative rather than a functional postulate. For functional reasons alone, the mutual expansion of problem-solving options does not appear to be necessary and, in cases where one's own problem-solving is based on sabotaging the problem-solving of other forms of life, it is even contraindicated. Although the orientational function of progress might argue in favor of integrative learning processes, because the ideologeme of functional learning quickly reaches its limits in the case of interdependent learning crises without the postulate of integration, it still remains unclear why and how actors should strive for such integration if their conflicting learning perspectives, based on their own functional requirements, do not allow for a multilateral expansion of problem-solving possibilities or render it useless. In such cases, it seems almost inevitable to branch out into contextually specified learning perspectives without any hope for conflict-free coexistence, regardless of whether the different contexts formally follow an identical principle by which they can be evaluated.

In summary, Jaeggi's theory provides a cross-contextual ideology of progress, but it is far from being an ideology for cross-contextual progress. Due to this functional insufficiency, her theory threatens to impose a principle of progress on diverse forms of life that encourages them to constantly enable new experiences and remain open to new problems, even if this does not correspond to their specific problems, structural conditions, values, interests, and needs, and gives rise to hardly resolvable conflicts, while regressive resistance would be functionally justified at the same time. To counteract this, Jaeggi's theory should address some instructive desiderata that are finally also groundbreaking for the ideology of progress. It should focus more on the differentiated environmental relationships and specification requirements of forms of life, including conflicts between them, in order to better take into account the divergences of different perspectives on functional learning. The problem of mutual learning blockages and interdependent learning crises, the associated functional relationship between divergent and integrative learning processes, between progressive adaptation and regressive resistance, and the functionality of unresolved learning contradictions should be

further elaborated in this context. Finally, the postulate of integrative learning, which was suggested here as an implication of Jaeggi's theory, should be elaborated more robustly from both normative and functional perspectives.

If this expansion succeeds, the proposed theory and ideology of functional learning could remedy the lack of democratic and emancipatory forms of resolving rivalries between forms of life, which Jaeggi herself highlights as one of the "most pressing and irrational phenomena of our time" (Jaeggi 2019, 102, translation KK). In doing so, it would finally achieve what Niklas Luhmann once proposed as a suitable idea of progress for modern society: a mastered differentiation, in which the potential for capturing and reducing complexity is increased (Luhmann 2024, 102).

5 Conclusion: What Else but Progress?

So, is Jaeggi's theory of progress suitable as a template for a modern ideology of progress? The answer is both yes and no – or rather: not yet. Jaeggi's achievement undoubtedly lies in having reformulated the idea of progress in such a way that it can provide guidance for diverse forms of life within the complex web of modern society. However, persistent orientation problems are foreseeable due to the specification and conflict requirements that this very web places on any ideology. Further developments of the idea of functional learning, based on theories of social differentiation, conflict, and hegemony, are therefore advisable, including a theory of integrative learning, which incorporates multiple perspectives, contents, and forms of learning, if overarching progress is to remain the goal rather than fragmentation into competing perspectives. Otherwise, functional learning would at best be an overarching criterion for assessing progress, but not the guiding principle of practical progress as a whole.

It remains to be seen whether Jaeggi's theory will follow such a development and whether it could succeed in doing so. Only then, however, would it be possible to conclusively evaluate the fit between theory, ideology, and modern society. From the perspective of a functional ideology analysis yet another question arises that fundamentally affects her project: Why progress at all? Are there no alternatives to this idea that offer comparable orientation and perhaps even work better than the traditional semantic? Moreover, isn't it possible that clinging to the idea of progress itself is a problem because it keeps us trapped in a modernity that is no longer capable to respond to its own problems, so that progress causes us to regressively unlearn how to discard semantics that have become problematic? To put it bluntly, isn't it maybe the overcoming of progress that marks true progress?

One may consider these questions to be philosophical speculation, but from a functional perspective they point to the legitimate question of functional equivalents to the idea of progress. Such an inquiry cannot be carried out here anymore, but the criteria for functional equivalence can be compiled once again on the basis of the previous analysis to clarify the functional profile of Jaeggi's proposal. According to this, an equivalent would have to be able to function as a reflexive meta-value for evaluating processes of normative change in a way that can adapt to complex contextual conditions without being tied to a specific context. Unlike the freedom of individual privacy, this new guiding value should not, for example, originate from a liberal form of life and be unsuitable for authoritarian nationalists per se (or vice versa). Instead, it would have to be able to serve as a guiding value for both, regardless of whether it points out deficits that are difficult to remedy. What an alternative to the modernized ideology of progress would urgently need to achieve, therefore, would be a broad generalization of its meaning for instructive and reflexive functions, even if this might make it seem less instructive for concrete actions.

Equivalents of this profile would now have to be identified. However, it is precisely the level of abstraction that places Jaeggi's concept of progress in a paradoxical position regarding such concerns, because as a functional learning process, it is capable of declaring even the transition to alternative semantics as progress. Even at the supposed end of progress, one could say, our history of progress continues, as long as we keep learning to solve problems through it – for example, in the field of social critique. From this point of view, the search for equivalents seems futile, because the dualism of learning and learning blockages is rising to a universal formula for dynamic orientations in processes of social change. One might consider this a problem or an advantage of Jaeggi's theory. Ultimately, however, it is a reminder of her original argument: that anyone who does not want to talk about progress should first *learn* to remain silent about regressions – or at least reflect on what alternatives modern society could use to find orientation in its history instead.

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