

Peter Wagner*

Processual Progress, the Deflation of History, and the De-substantiation of Problems

<https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2025-2017>

Abstract: The following reflections are provoked by, and focus on, one of the key statements of synthesis in Rahel Jaeggi's treatise on *Progress and Regression*, namely 'Societies do not have goals, they solve problems.' The phrase serves to criticize philosophies of history that work with a strong conception of progress in its first part and announces the step to elaborate a more adequate concept in the second. While agreeing with the underlying diagnosis and quest, none of the two steps nor the connection between the two is found entirely compelling. An alternative approach, hinted at in conclusion, would need to connect socio-philosophical conceptions of progress not with philosophies of history in the conventional understanding of the term, but with global history and historical sociology.

Keywords: progress; philosophy of history; historical sociology; freedom; equality

"Societies do not have goals, they solve problems." This is one of the key statements in Rahel Jaeggi's thought-provoking treatise on *Progress and Regression* (Jaeggi 2025, 45, similarly 165, in which 'have' is replaced by the more active 'pursue,' and 176).¹ In a highly condensed and succinct way, the sentence displays the two complementary objectives which Jaeggi aims to accomplish. First, she criticizes and, indeed, discards the conception of progress that emerged in Western Europe during the Enlightenment and diffused across much of the globe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a common view, this conception saw organized social life as moving gradually but inescapably and irresistibly towards the realization of normative goals. Once having this conception effectively criticized, second, Jaeggi

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all following quotations refer to Rahel Jaeggi's book.

***Corresponding author: Peter Wagner**, Catalan Institute for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA), and Department of Sociology, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain,
E-mail: peter.wagner@ub.edu

aims to elaborate a new conception of progress focussed not on striving towards a more or less distant future, but on solving problems in the present.

Beyond being goal-oriented, Jaeggi characterizes the time-honoured conception of progress as both “comprehensive” (23), that is, as generally referring to progress of society or history, and “substantive”, that is, having a determinate content, and in her view this is an impossible combination. Progress can be assessed by content, e.g., getting faster from one place to another by train than by horse-drawn carriage, but then it is determined by a specific objective and not comprehensive or “overarching” (40, 166). In turn, any ‘overarching sense’ of progress “cannot be thought and evaluated in substantive terms, that is, in terms of content, but only as a process and in relation to its form” (177). Thus, Jaeggi’s main reconstructive assertion is that a certain form of problem-solving by societies is what we may justifiably call progress. In her own terms, “progress is whatever pertains to an ongoing, self-enriching problem-solving process” (189, see also 42, and elsewhere).

Rahel Jaeggi’s book is a bold attempt at reconsidering a key issue of social philosophy. Its German edition has already been widely discussed, and other contributions to this issue will certainly explore its considerable merits further as well as, maybe, identify some weaknesses. This opens the space for raising here a rather specific issue, namely the relation between these two rather distinct aims of Jaeggi’s reasoning, i.e., discarding the time-honoured conception of progress and elaborating a new, more tenable one. While in Jaeggi’s reasoning the latter objective builds on the former, this is not necessarily the case. On the one side, one can discard the time-honoured conception of progress and, as a consequence, feel forced to reject any conception of possible progress at all. Jaeggi is aware of this possibility, and it is the one she explicitly argues against, not least because she sees it as a tendency in current critical debate. In her view, it is important to retain a viable conception of overarching progress, and this is what she aims to provide through her focus on processual problem-solving.

On the other side, though, as it will be argued in what follows, one can also have a conception of progress starting out from experience and addressing problems without, as she does, ejecting substantive expectations about the future. Or to put it more strongly, by ejecting substantive expectations about the future the conception of progress is not only usefully “deflated”, as she claims (187), but entirely hollowed out. Moreover, one can hardly have a conception of progress starting out from experience and problems without reflecting on the historical experience with the strong conception of progress, that is, the problems it claimed to address and the problems that it may have created. In other words, what follows here is a critical reflection on the two parts of the key sentence from *Progress and Regression* quoted above and on the connection between the two.

1 Philosophy and History of Progress: A Note on Method

Before proceeding a note on method is in order to avoid misunderstandings or just talking past each other. Jaeggi aims at elaborating criteria for progress and regression taking a socio-philosophical perspective. Doing so, she explicitly rules out assessing in “empirical” terms (17, 24) whether historical progress has occurred or not. One may have to accept – even though maybe grudgingly – the divide – or as some may want to call it: the division of labour – between philosophy and the empirically oriented social sciences and humanities. But there are two specific features in Jaeggi’s approach that suggest one should not do so without raising further issues when discussing her book. First, Jaeggi starts out by – rightly, in this reader’s view – criticizing the conception of progress that has been dominant for a long time. But she does not explicitly address the question whether the reign of this conception had any effect on the course of history and/or on the way problems have been addressed under this reign (for an attempt, see Wagner 2023a). In this regard, her approach suffers from a lack that undermines her reasoning. As she apparently quite undecidedly states, “[E]ven if holding on to a philosophy of history is problematic, relinquishing it is not a solution either” (37).

Second, despite her exclusion of empirically based assessments, empirical information enters her account through numerous examples, some of which are even called “prime examples” (125). But she does not give a comprehensive indication regarding what these examples stand for. Thus, she breaches a boundary that she herself erected to make her reasoning tenable. Both these features suggest that it just may not be possible to elaborate criteria for progress and regression in socio-philosophical terms without engaging with experiences and problems in historico-sociological terms. Readers may judge at the end of what follows whether this is a compelling objection to Rahel Jaeggi’s reasoning (and take my maybe excessive self-citations as elements for further discussion).

2 Experience and Expectations

The separation of the horizon of expectations from the space of experience was key to the emergence of a new political language during the decades around 1800 and in particular to the elaboration of the strong conception of progress, if we believe Reinhart Koselleck (to whom Jaeggi refers, but only in a very specific way). This would mean that experience no longer guides action, or at least much less so, and instead expectations about the future substitute for any lessons from past experience. The Enlightenment commitment to human autonomy, in a combination of

freedom and reason, has indeed often been seen as the core of the modern self-understanding. In a variety of ways, between philosophy of history and sociology, this self-understanding has been considered as crucial for setting social life on a new trajectory.

From then on, objections to this emerging self-understanding came to be regarded as conservative, or as reactionary in literally reacting to the radically new foundation of social life as aimed at by the French Revolution (see Hirschman 1991). Conservatives of the time, such as Edmund Burke, argued against the ‘deflation’ of experience and kept suggesting that experience should weigh more strongly on one’s actions than expectations, which were considered to be lofty, abstract, unfounded, inviable. Returning to Jaeggi’s proposal to define progress as a “self-enriching experiential learning process” (40 and elsewhere), one recognizes here what then was a classical conservative reasoning. Applying her conceptual tools further, one can suggest that the deflation of experience in the emerging strong concept of progress tends to block problem-solving processes, thus, tends to be regressive. The opposition between the classical vision of progress and hers could not be more pronounced. What once was seen as progressive must now be considered as regressive. And Jaeggi’s reflections on progress start to look like a subtly presented conservative manifesto.

Something is clearly jarring in this account. On the one hand, and that would be in line with Jaeggi, it was always far-fetched to think that expectations can be entirely detached from experience. Every interpretative analysis of even utopian visions will find that they are shaped by experiences of their authors and promoters. On the other hand, is it not almost similarly far-fetched to assume that problem-solving – a term to be scrutinized in a moment – is only pursued through learning from experience? Would it not be more appropriate to consider a problem as precisely arising when experience alone is not sufficient to overcome a critical moment? Or in other words, is problem-solving not best understood as making a connection between a past experience and an imagined future state?

3 Pursuing a Goal or Solving Problems?

Jaeggi’s key sentence opposes ‘pursuing goals’ to ‘solving problems’. Intentionally, the first expression aims at teleological views of history, especially those with a comprehensive substantive concept of progress. But two questions arise from this opposition of goals and problems.

The first question is one of intellectual history, namely whether the Koselleckian concept of progress, as for simplicity reasons we may call it, was indeed always teleological, aimed at pursuing goals (for recent explorations, see Chakrabarty et al.

2015). True, there are considerable components of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought that had an endpoint in view, often related to messianic thinking. Arguably, though, the more characteristic assumption was the one of a “logic of history”, as Jaeggi acknowledges and also accepts for her own approach (36, 41, 161), a new dynamic of change, driven by functional requirements or by conflict, in the two most prominent views.

The working of such a logic mostly does not have a determined and definable endpoint, thus is not teleological, rather evolutionary. In deterministic versions of such thinking, though, the logic imposes itself with some degree of necessity, thus leaves little or no space for historical contingency. Jaeggi aims to steer “a course between teleology and contingency” (41), seeing the overemphasis on the latter as a characteristic of our time, but by mobilizing Hegel and Marx for her purposes, as we shall see later in more detail, she places herself very close to a comprehensive substantive concept of progress, despite the ‘dialectic.’

This leads to the second question. When Jaeggi talks about the pursuit of goals, she means comprehensive and overarching goals (as her original German term *Ziele* maybe more strongly connotes), not any kind of goal. Even so, her statement is question-begging. Societies may well have goals and pursue them (we will have to leave here largely open what a ‘society’ precisely is and how we can see it as acting). Moreover, they may exactly formulate goals that they aim to pursue in their attempts at solving problems. Let us just consider two examples from, arguably, the origins and the end of the strong conception of progress, thus also linking a historical to the conceptual aspect:

During the eighteenth century, first, awareness arose that French society may have a problem with liberty and equality, being hierarchically stratified and denying liberties to the lower strata (for a more detailed discussion see Wagner 2023b). Through major upheavals at the end of that century, the society committed itself to the goal of enhancing liberty and equality with a view to solving these problems. There may have been, as mentioned, a teleological component to this pursuit, aiming at something like full liberty and complete equality. But given the contested nature of both concepts it is more plausible to assume that the goals were reducing inequality and limitations to liberty (we will need to come back to this issue). In any case, French society remains officially committed to pursuing these goals up to the present day, as a look at any French townhall shows.

In our current time, second, most European societies declare themselves committed to solving the problem of climate change. Doing so, they have formulated a clear goal, namely reaching so-called net zero emissions of carbon dioxide by a certain point in time. If they reached that self-set goal, which appears highly unlikely, many members of these societies would not hesitate to call this progress. Jaeggi

may want to object that this would be progress in a determinate sense, namely a measurable contribution to slow down global warming.

Looking at the overall problem-oriented debate about the necessity and urgency of an ecological transition, though, there should be little doubt that this would be progress in a comprehensive and overarching sense (and Jaeggi tends to agree, as we shall see later). At the same time, the action started out from the identification and interpretation of a problem, and the goal was formulated to solve that problem. Rephrasing Jaeggi we may suggest that she more precisely means: ‘Societies may well pursue goals, but it is only by their way of solving problems that we can assess whether they contribute to overarching progress.’ But that sounds rather odd. It is difficult to uphold the opposition between substantive goals and processual problem-solving and consider only the latter when assessing whether progress has occurred.

4 Problems, Expectations, and Expectation-Generated Problems

But maybe Jaeggi means something else when she talks about the need to “deflate [...] in a specific way” (187) the concept of progress. Possibly, though in contrast to what she explicitly says, it is not substantive goals as such that should be dropped from the assessment of progress, but the universalist claims about progress that philosophies of history originating in Western Europe made at a historical moment when West European societies – in particular Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France – had generated unprecedented wealth and material well-being for relatively large parts of their population. Jaeggi’s critique of the strong concept of progress is very much motivated by the now widespread insight that this progress was brought about through the domination of other world-regions and highly asymmetric participation in such progress also within West European societies. At the same time, she argues against the conclusion that there can be no general concept of progress at all because the progress of some tends to be the domination and exploitation of others. Largely agreeing with the critique, we want to recast here the portrait of the strong conception of progress against Jaeggi’s view, but in Jaeggian terms, in three quick steps.

First, the strong conception of progress did not spring readymade from a situation of European world-domination. In contrast, it was born out of experience with fundamental problems that European societies encountered during (what European historians call) early modernity. These problems were: first, the encounter with completely unknown and unexpected others in America, which gave rise to arguably the first systematic elaboration of universal human rights

in the Salamanca-Valladolid debates in the middle of the sixteenth century (at the core of one of Jaeggi's 'prime examples', slavery and its abolition); and second, the destruction of a common cosmology and world-view among Christians due to the Reformation and the religious wars, which gave rise to rethinking political order starting out from individual human beings and a social contract between them. At its origins, therefore, the strong concept of progress, not yet under that denomination, was not much different from the concept of progress Jaeggi advocates.

Subsequent to these conceptual inventions, second, West European societies arose to world-domination, and it became rather common to make a connection between these new foundations of political order and worldly success. Linking social-contract theory with political economy, commercial republicanism (for a recent discussion, see Taylor 2024) became the hegemonic worldview among Western European elites and supposedly the key to the region's rise. Supported by the observable 'Great Divergence' with other world-regions (Pomeranz 2000), Europe came to be seen as being at the apex of history by its elites from within and often also by those from without, and philosophies of history came to be based on views of historical evolution to higher stages. In combination of the material experience and the conceptual layout, high expectations were raised with regard to future evolution (even though, importantly, classical political economists still accepted the land constraint and saw the highest stage as already reached; see, e.g., Wrigley 2010, ch.1; Wrigley 2016, ch.2).

This is the background to the detachment of expectations from experiences, in Koselleck's formula (which, it should be underlined, builds on analyses of political concepts in German language). When a new stage of history had been reached, in particular if this meant the 'exit from self-incurred immaturity' (Immanuel Kant), past experience could provide hardly any lessons any longer. The horizon of the future seemed widely open. At this point, Jaeggi's critique of philosophies of history starts to bite.

But only partly so. As mentioned above, the rise of the Koselleckian concept of progress did not entail that progress was no longer meant to solve problems. Rather, third, it created what we may call excessive expectations about problem-solving. If societies were now on an evolutionary trajectory, then they would solve their problems in due course, but the course may go on for long. Reaching the goals may be situated at considerable temporal distance from diagnosing the problem. This distance also lends itself to the impression that pursuing goals is something different from problem-solving. While we have already argued above that this impression is misleading, it is seemingly supported by the discrepancy between a rather abstract goal and an experienced problem.

We can illustrate this discrepancy by briefly returning to the example of liberty and equality, which were key concepts of progress-oriented philosophies of

history as well as markers for the problems of pronounced inequality and lack of liberties. The French Revolution is often referred to as the key example for the excess in expectations when resolving these problems. In some accounts, rephrased here in Jaeggi's terminology, the devaluation of political experience turned the French Revolution into an inadequate approach to solving the problems of inequality and lack of liberty (a classical work is Arendt 1963; see recently also the remarks by Ricci forthcoming with regard to political liberty). In contrast, so the reasoning can proceed, the founding of the United States of America drew on ancient experiences with, and early-modern reflections on, government and liberty to create the system of checks and balances; Great Britain avoided entirely a radical rupture with experience; and Germany may have been a seedbed of progress-oriented philosophies of history but was extremely cautious with political reforms during the nineteenth century.

Comparing interpretations of modernity in this – rather loose – way may help understanding the relation between experience and expectations in more nuanced historical terms. Once the strong conception of progress had become hegemonic and shaped expectations, experiences started to be made with it, and they have altered the view on progress. One might say the horizon of expectations came closer, and appeared less open, because experiences made some expectations disappear. Current doubts about progress and attempts at rethinking the concept may just reflect that the distance between expectations and experiences was diminished again over time; it may even have disappeared. This is what Hartog (2003) called the rise of presentism as a new regime of historicity at the end of the twentieth century. If one were malicious, one could say that Jaeggi comes quite late with the critical part of her diagnosis. More constructively, one can ask what her own presentism, namely the focus on problem-solving in the present, entails for her criteria for progress and regression.

5 The Problem with Processual Problem-Solving

In other words, we maybe need to get at Jaeggi's reasoning from yet another angle. Suspending for a moment both the question of the opposition between pursuing goals and solving problems (both parts of her key sentence together), and the historical experiences with a strong concept of progress (the first part), we may just straightforwardly turn to the second part of her key sentence and ask what the gain is in focussing on processual problem-solving.

The philosophical problem Jaeggi wants to address is the divide between universalism and relativism in the assessment of progress. This is already rather clear in her initial discussion of critiques of progress, not least from a decolonial or

global-historical perspective. Moreover, this goal becomes more explicit when she comes to spell out her own approach. Since she wants to maintain some notion of comprehensiveness for her criteria for progress, on her own assumptions she can only resort to a 'processual' concept, bracketing out any substance.

Slightly worried that I fail to understand her, I will quote here in more detail to allow the reader their own judgement. For Jaeggi, progress "does not consist in arriving at a specific predetermined state or in realizing a specific pre-determinable good" (40), because this would introduce a particular context with its problem identification in what is meant to be a general concept. This negative determination leads to the subsequent positive definitory step. Explicitly: "My proposal deflates the concept of progress in a specific way: not by confining it to a particular context, but by linking it to the overarching form of events in the sense of their dynamics, hence by taking as its criterion the quality of the learning process" (187). This "quality" is further specified as follows: "[P]rogress is a self-enriching experiential learning process for finding solutions to problems" (40).

While one could have thought that Jaeggi's concept of progress replaces the pursuit of substantive goals with processual problem-solving, the specification quoted above contains not less than three further definitory elements: learning, experience, and enrichment. To be progressive, it seems, the process of problem-solving has, first, to be based on learning, i.e., presumably apply new knowledge or insights; second, it has to draw on experience, which presumably is in contrast to expectations but maybe also to theory; and third, it has to be enriching, the most important but also the most troubling element.

At a closer look, namely, it is only the enriching component that makes a process of problem-solving progressive. Regression, namely, is defined as blocking problem-solving processes; it "can be understood as a process of unlearning in the sense of a systematic blockage to experience" (191). Or: Progress (as derived from Dewey's thinking) "denotes not only a *quantitative increase* in knowledge and experience but also a *qualitative intensification*" (186, original emphasis). On the one hand, this is very plausible, also in the light of what was said above: Missing knowledge or insight could be taken to define problems in general; and some kind of experience is always what one draws on when solving problems. These terms, thus, are more descriptive than definitory. Which leaves 'enrichment' to define progress.

The criteria Jaeggi is searching for are meant to distinguish progress from regression. As such, they need to include some identifiable measures of progress or regression, as Jaeggi agrees, and therefore, they would need to identify enrichment or blocking through such measures. Despite the welter of examples that Jaeggi introduces in her reasoning, however, I have not found any in which an analysis of the quality of the learning process was offered that could tell us whether problem-solving was experientially enriched or blocked. But I have to be precise:

Jaeggi does discuss some historical processes under the light of whether they constituted progress or not, and they refer to her ‘prime examples’ such as the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women. But rather than looking at these processes in search of their quality, she takes these examples from Marx and Hegel, and she problematizes the interpretations given by these authors to conclude on the following:

Progress means [...] that a step has been taken towards unlocking the potential inherent in a given situation, towards developing the conditions that enable a process of emancipation. This gives a further indication of what is meant by an enrichment process in the context of a dialectic of progress. (196)

Except that it does not; or better: it does so at an enormous price, namely inscribing the processes into philosophies of history that were evolutionary, even though dialectically.

6 Enrichment and Possibilities

The term ‘dialectic’ signals not much more, for current purposes, than that these philosophies of history also include the possibility of regression. Following what I understand to be the gist of Jaeggi’s proposal, though, one should be able to apply the criteria for progress and regression – enrichment or blockage – to problem-solving processes in the present. Let me try out one example to show how it seems to me that the criteria should be applied (this draws on Wagner 2024, ch.6).

The rise of totalitarianisms in twentieth-century Europe occurred against the ideational background of progressive philosophies of history. It has been analysed as an incapacity to address the ‘social question,’ the problem of miserable living and working conditions for the majority population in a context of increasing production of material wealth. The confrontation of the rising workers’ movement with the unwillingness of the elites to cede to some of the former’s demands can well be characterized as a blockage in solving a major societal problem, leading to the collapse of some existing democracies. Jaeggi indeed analyses fascism as regression (206).

After the Second World War, in turn, a way of overcoming the blockage appeared to have been found by enhancing material wealth and social security of the majority population through the mass production of consumer goods, while at the same time securing the privileges of the elites. In Jaeggi’s terminology, this can be seen as “a self-enriching experiential learning process for finding solutions to problems”. Without the terminology, it was indeed widely seen as such, even somewhat grudgingly by critics. However, this solution led rather straightforwardly, and

to some extent knowingly, into what Jaeggi characterizes as the “impasse with their way of life and economic system” (42) into which Western societies have entered with their relation to nature. As ‘impasse’ is almost synonymous to ‘blockage,’ Jaeggi seems to consider the incapacity to address the ecological emergency as a regression, and we would agree. But does she really?

Jaeggi acknowledges that the solution to one problem can create other problems, and this may just be such a case. But in as far as problems are substantive problems, this could not be assessed in terms of progress or regression, in her conceptualization. Instead, one would need to look at the enriching or blocking nature of the experience. There would be a case for stating that the building of democratic welfare states in Western Europe after the Second World War was enriching, because it meant that class confrontation was overcome by communication and co-operation across class divides (some leftist hardliners would not agree, though). But there is also a case for stating that the ‘Great Acceleration’ (Steffen et al. 2015) in the exploitation of biophysical resources was again based on Western domination of the planet and other world-regions and thus created blockages for the future resolution of the ecological emergency because of entrenched historical injustice.

At one point, Jaeggi suggests that the enriching or blocking quality of a solution can often only be recognized with “hindsight” (41), but this casts strong doubt on the merit of criteria that apparently cannot be safely applied when they are needed. At another point, she speaks about the accumulation of enriching experiences, including learning how to learn, thus sketching a path towards historical progress that will open up new possibilities. As said before, this perspective moves her into close proximity to Hegel and Marx (though not Adorno), all of whom she indeed endorses, but at the same time also to the concept of progress that she wanted to overcome. Aware of this move, she retracts and underlines that no such accumulation is certain because it can be undone by experiences that block and rule out future possibilities. From the outset, Jaeggi made clear that her aim was not to assess whether there has been progress in history, and this has become very obvious in the course of her reasoning. But we fail to see that she accomplishes her aim of elaborating criteria for progress and regression, because her focus on processual problem-solving relies on concepts of enrichment and blockage that she cannot specify without recourse to intellectual sources that are, or so it seems to us, alien to her enterprise.

7 Societies Do Not Solve Problems – Problems Get Reconfigured

Arguably, Jaeggi did not do herself a favour when choosing the expression ‘problem-solving,’ which generates immediate associations with a technocratic view of

problems and a functional approach to their solution. In that sense, for instance, solar radiation management would solve the problem of global warming. Despite some her wording, not least in her key sentence, this is not her approach, though. She underlines that problems – in particular, second-order problems, as she calls them – do not just emerge and exist. They need to be identified and interpreted; it needs to be clarified whose problems they are and who may benefit from what kind of solution, and all of this in constellations of hierarchy and domination. Acknowledging all of this entails that it is quite open what is meant by ‘solving.’ And indeed, in this context, Jaeggi’s most interesting assertion is that a “problem is not solved once and for all” (160); rather, its solution generates new problems. The final issue to be addressed here is whether the absence of solutions does not require a different understanding of what a problem is.

In French philosophy, the term ‘*problématique*’ is quite fundamental, going back to Gaston Bachelard’s work in the philosophy of science, and it has been widely adopted in the social sciences and humanities. As Maniglier (2021, 28) has recently argued, it widens the understanding of the critical engagement of human beings with the world from obstacles that need to be overcome, i.e., a ‘negative’ concept of problem, to the structuration of an issue, i.e., a ‘positive’ concept of problem. In this sense, a *problématique* is “the matrix or the angle from which it will become possible and even necessary to formulate a certain number of precise problems”; it is “an operation on the very substance of our ordinary life” (Maniglier 2021, 33 and 34; see also Maniglier 2012, 21 and 23; see Árnason 2025, for reflections on parallels in Max Weber’s thought). In other words, those ‘precise problems’ within a *problématique* can possibly be – temporarily – solved, but the *problématique* persists and keeps calling on human beings to engage with it anew in changing situations.

In earlier work (Wagner 2008), I suggested that human societies have tended to construct and made explicit three fundamental *problématiques*: the satisfaction of material needs, or the economic *problématique*; the setting of the rules for life in common, or the political *problématique*; and the certainty of the knowledge on which organized social life is based, which I labelled – too narrowly – the epistemic *problématique*. Relating this proposal to Jaeggi’s conceptualization, the following observations can be made (for reasons of space, and maybe also for concision, in the form of a brief enumeration):

First, unlike Jaeggi may suspect, these are not “*fundamental and timeless anthropological conundrums*” (160, original emphasis), but constructed problem constellations that take their specific shapes in space and time. Second, these *problématiques* address substantive issues; they are matrices of substantive problems that need to be addressed. Third, ‘precise problems’ within these *problématiques* can be considered solved, but the *problématiques* remain open for

reinterpretation, and the solutions once adopted open for contestation. What Jaeggi calls ‘solution’ is, therefore, better referred to as a reconfiguration of problems within a *problématique*. Fourth, within an interpretative range, one can distinguish better from worse solutions. Famines or large-scale death from heat exposure are a failure to address the economic *problématique*. War or civil war are a failure to address the political *problématique*. Widespread uncertainty in society about ‘how to go on’ is a failure to address the epistemic *problématique*. But, fifth, there are no solutions that are superior in principle, not only because they can be re-interpreted and contested in general, but also because the material conditions for addressing them, which Jaeggi also underlines, change.

Still, sixth, the move from a worse to a better solution can be called progress, and the reverse regression. And seventh, such progress will often be substantive and overarching progress, not least because the *problématiques* are constructed in a substantive and overarching way. There are ways of stating that people are less unfree and less unequal, or that a way of life is more or less ecologically sustainable. Which is not to deny, eighth, that there can also be progress regarding the ‘quality’ of problem-solving processes, which may well be highly significant. But the assessment of such processes, ninth, is not less open to interpretative dispute than the one of substantive achievements. Thus, there is no gain in moving from substance to process, and no point in opposing the one to the other.

8 Forms of Life, Plurality of Progress, and Interconnected Histories: In Place of a Conclusion

Considering this brief sketch, how should I conclude on the relation of my own thinking about progress and regression to Jaeggi’s? There is a strong way of phrasing my critical observations: We cannot have confidence in the proposed new criteria for progress, and there was no need to entirely give up on the old ones. But given that I find much to agree with in Jaeggi’s reflections, this statement creates too much of an opposition. It is more interesting to find out what the reasons for the different viewpoints are. I will just try to do so very briefly in conclusion.

The driving force for Jaeggi seems to be provided by the existing critical debate about the Western conception of progress. Accepting this critique, for plausible reasons, she concludes on a plurality of understandings of progress. She locates then, as it seems, this plurality in different forms of life. As a consequence, substantive progress can only be identified within forms of life. But this step leads into relativism, a conclusion that Jaeggi would like to avoid. Her move away from substance

to process, thus, is a way to maintain a limited overarching concept of progress within a plurality of substantive understandings of progress.

If this ultra-brief reconstruction is correct, I find it fully understandable. The step I find unwarranted, though, is the location of plurality in forms of life. This step makes these forms separate entities, between which different understandings of progress exist. They appear, indeed, like different ‘societies’ that pursue or do not pursue goals, solve or do not solve problems. At other points, in contrast, Jaeggi recognizes “the real interconnections and interdependencies that shape our planet” (37), which arguably also include interconnections and interdependencies of understandings of progress. The plurality, therefore, is not based in separate entities, or at least not necessarily, but emerges from interconnections and interdependencies. The latter involve domination and oppression, thus impact on the ways organized social configuration interpret and can address the *problématiques*. Importantly, such asymmetry may entail that an enriching problem-solving process in one world-region may be blocking problem solving processes in others. But these interconnections and interdependencies also involve communication and mutual enrichment, which may inspire generally better ways of addressing the *problématiques*.

At one point, Jaeggi speaks about her “quasi-formal solution, and the orientation to problem-solving it entails, [as ...] neither ‘global’ nor ‘local’; it concerns world history neither as a whole nor in its parts.” (187) This statement conceptualizes world-history dichotomically and, thus, mirrors the distinction between universalism and relativism. Global historians and historical sociologists rather think in terms of a multiply differentiated world-history, which has been some kind of ‘whole’ for at least five hundred years but also persists in having ‘parts’ with different problem constellations and possibilities for action (Mota and Wagner 2019). But here we seem to be back to the divide between philosophy and the empirically oriented social sciences and humanities, which I would prefer to see overcome rather than having to grudgingly accept it.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *On Revolution*. New York: Viking.
- Árnason, Jóhann Páll. 2025. “Research Program, Paradigm or Problematic? Three Ways of Reading Max Weber.” *Historical Sociology* (1): 115–48.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, Sanjay Subrahmanjan, and Henning Trüper, eds. 2015. *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hartog, François. 2003. *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Reaction. Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jaeggi, Rahel. 2025. *Progress and Regression*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Maniglier, Patrice. 2012. "What Is a Problematic." *Radical Philosophy* 173 (May/June): 21–3.
- Maniglier, Patrice. 2021. "Problem and Structure: Bachelard, Deleuze and Transdisciplinarity." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38 (2): 25–45.
- Mota, Aurea, and Peter Wagner. 2019. *Collective Action and Political Transformations. The Entangled Experiences of Brazil, South Africa and Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pomeranz, Kenneth. 2000. *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World-Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ricci, David. Forthcoming. *Defending Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Steffen, Will, W. Broadgate, L. Deutsch, O. Gaffney, and C. Ludwig. 2015. "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene. The Great Acceleration." *The Anthropocene Review* (2): 1.
- Taylor, Robert S. 2024. "Commercial Republicanism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Republicanism*, edited by Frank Lovett, and Mortimer Sellers. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wagner, Peter. 2008. *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wagner, Peter. 2023a. "Ways out of the Modern Labyrinth: Normative Expectations and Subsequent Social Change." In *Civilization, Modernity, and Critique: Engaging Johann P. Arnason's Macro-Social Theory*, edited by L'ubomir Dunaj, Jeremy C. Smith, and Kurt C. M. Mertel. London: Routledge.
- Wagner, Peter. 2023b. "Autonomy and Equality: Exploring the Antinomy of Modernity (If Any)." *International Journal of Social Imaginaries* 2 (1): 7–26.
- Wagner, Peter. 2024. *Carbon Societies. The Social Logic of Fossil Fuels*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wrigley, E. A. 2010. *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wrigley, E. A. 2016. *The Path to Sustained Growth. England's Transition from an Organic Economy to an Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.