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THE AMBIVALENCE OF PROGRESS

PHD AND POSTDOC WORKSHOP

7-8 NOVEMBER 2024

CITY MUSEUM OF LJUBLJANA



BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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EDITED BY: ROBIN DOLAR, ALJAŽ SEKNE

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FOREWORD

Progress is an intricate notion. On the one hand, contemporary societies seem to be better off than societies of the past by many indications: modern economic growth is unprecedented, life expectancy is higher than it has ever been, new technologies have enabled possibilities that previous generations could only dream of, wars between great powers have been on the decline, etc. All this would seem to naturally inspire optimism about the nature of historical development.

There are, however, many objections that can be raised. Economic expansion resulted in an unprecedented destruction of the environment, which is certain to entail major political and social consequences in the 21st century. The level of inequality both between and within countries is still very high and has been growing in the neoliberal period, which points to the fact that many countries and social groups have been excluded from the fruits of progress. Technological advancements may have opened up new possibilities, but they also unleashed new problems, including new kinds of violence and warfare. There is furthermore the inherent power disparity and exploitative nature of class relations in capitalism, which profoundly affects most people's everyday life. Progress has many flip sides.

The dilemma is not new. While it was lurking in the background for most of human history, the notion of progress came to the fore in the age of enlightenment and was one of the defining ideas of the 19th century, informing the ruling ideologies. However, this faith in progress came to a partial halt in the face of the two world wars and the rise of totalitarian regimes in the first half of the 20th century. After its resumption in the post-war period, another climax of the belief in progress was the period of the 1990s, when history itself was famously proclaimed to be at an end. This optimism was once again short-lived, since the events of 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of new populisms complicated any simple historical narrative. Hence it seems that the idea of progress itself has a cyclical – rather than a progressive – history.

These predicaments also take on a specific flavor in the local Slovenian context. While the older historiography, which understood Slovenian history as a grand march toward national independence, has been largely superseded, most contemporary historians would probably agree that the falling apart of Yugoslavia and the transition to liberal democracy was a welcome development. Leftwing critics, on the other hand, point to the price that was paid for this advance: the steep rise of precarious work, the unequal distribution of wealth, the corrosion of social welfare, etc. The transition to capitalism and liberal democracy resulted in a number of negative developments, which one has to take into account in understanding the history of Slovenia since its independence.

All this suggests that progress is an ambivalent and multi-faceted notion that should be used with a great deal of caution and reflection. How, then, should we think about the major changes that happened with the onset of modernity? How was progress conceptualized in different historical epochs? To what extent did notions of progress differ between different regions and different social groups – and what can we learn from such comparisons? How should we understand the transitions between different political regimes, particularly in the 20th century?

These are some of the issues that are going to be discussed on the PhD and Postdoc Workshop, 'The Ambivalence of Progress'.

PROGRAM

Thursday, November 7

9:00-9:30 **Registration**

9:30-10:00 **Introduction**

prof. dr. Mojca Schlamberger Brezar, Dean of the Faculty of Arts

izr. prof. dr. Kornelija Ajlec, Head of the Department of History

10:00-11:00 **The macro-historical perspective on progress**

Tibor Rutar: Has history ended? In defense of a non-teleological, Pinkerian notion of historical progress

11:00-11:30 **Coffee break**

11:30-13:00 **The 1848 revolution, neoabsolutism and progress**

Svit Komel: Abolition of serfdom and the reactionary revolution of 1848

Vita Zalar: Progress for whom? Roma, Sinti, and the broken promise of the 1848 bourgeois revolution in the Habsburg Empire

Miroslav Vašík: Postrevolutionary neoabsolutism in Austria and progress

13:00-14:00 **Lunch break**

14:00-15:00 **The pitfalls of technological progress**

Jakub Raška: Journeymen between tradition and modernity

Anna Remešová: Exposition 'Technology in the Household' on a way to freedom and progress of the Czech nation at the end of the 19th century

15:00-15:30 **The appearance of progress**

Augusto Petter: Spectacles of civilization: a study on the political aesthetics of progress in the late 19th century

15:30-16:00 **Coffee break**

16:00-17:00 **The perspective of different social groups**

Shu Wan: The muted communist miracle: Chinese Deaf community's fates before and after 1949

Julija Šuligoj: Scaling boundaries: women, mountaineering, and the historical ambivalence of the female body

Friday, November 8

10:00-11:30 **The concept of progress**

Jan Bernot: Imagining the future: on the notions of progress or lack thereof among the Carniolan clergy

Simon Specht: A conceptual history of 'progress' in 20th century German political language

Sarah Lias Ceide: Technocracy, or the fluctuation of the idea of progress: a 20th century conceptual history

11:30-12:30 **Brunch break**

12:30-13:30 **Post-socialism and progress, part 1**

Ana Podvršič: Post-socialist transition as progress into dependency: the case of Slovenia

Nina Žnidaršič: Political discontinuities and transformations in the case of journalism in the period of transition: from self-governing socialism to (neo)liberal democracy

13:30-14:00 **Coffee break**

14:00-15:00 **Post-socialism and progress, part 2**

Ivan Roško: (Dis)continuity of nationalism and new ideological hierarchy after the 90s: the case of Croatia

Tjaša Konovšek: Europe and progress: a Slovene post-socialist perspective

15:00 **Conclusion**

ABSTRACTS

Imagining the future: on the notions of progress or lack thereof among Carniolan clergy

Jan Bernot

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At the end of April 1917, the Bishop of Ljubljana, Anton Bonaventura Jeglič, issued a new instruction for compiling a promemoria, which was to be submitted to the bishop by the parish priests during the canonical visitation. Henceforth, priests were also required to outline their visions of the post-war future. While historians of this period typically rely on the writings of prominent political and intellectual figures, the aforementioned primary source offers a unique perspective on the conceptualization of these visions among the parish priests. This presentation thus aims to analyze the visions of the future held by the Carniolan clergy on the eve of the collapse of Austria-Hungary. In this regard, particular attention will be paid to conceptualizations and evocations of progress or lack thereof. To what extent did the imagined future differ from the lived reality of the time? How common were explicit evocations of progress? What were the defining characteristics of notions of progress at the time when the established order was crumbling, and the new one had yet to emerge?

Keywords: progress, visions of the future, clergy, Carniola, Austria-Hungary

Technocracy, or the fluctuation of the idea of progress: a 20th century conceptual history

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The term 'technocracy' is generally widely recognized among scholars as being just as conceptually imprecise as it is widespread. While some efforts have been made to coherently define and classify 'technocracy' as a phenomenon in recent times, researchers have yet to ask the question of its terminological origin and evolution. This seems like an unjustified blind spot in historical research. In fact, a conceptual history of 'technocracy' reveals how the term has been intrinsically tied to the notion of social, scientific and technological 'progress' from the 1920s onwards. This presentation intends to show the constant fluctuations of the idea of progress through the long-term analysis of when, how, and by whom the term 'technocracy' was used: from its origin as a 'utopia of progress' in the context of the economic crises of 1929 to its 'reinvention' by the Nazi and Fascist regimes and their idea of progress and modernity, up to Europe's first 'technocratic governments' in the 1990s.

Keywords: conceptual history, history of ideas, modernity, technocracy, progress

Abolition of serfdom and the reactionary revolution of 1848

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The abolition of serfdom has been consistently seen as a sign of progress, as a higher stage of development in the history of a civilization. Since George Friedrich Knapp, historians have tended to present the 'liberation of the peasants' (*Bauernbefreiung*) as a crucial break in teleological narratives of world history. Yugoslav historiography of the 1848 revolution in the Austrian Empire mostly adopted this viewpoint, although it also highlighted the mass proletarianization of smaller peasants that underpinned the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The presentation will revise these interpretations by taking a closer look at the land reforms that implemented a capitalist form of property in the Austrian Empire. It will show how the contrivers of these reforms understood progress not as an improvement of socio-economic conditions, but as the 'unburdening of land' and preservation of the 'holy property' of former manorial lords.

Keywords: *Grundentlastung*, feudalism, capitalism, *Bauernbefreiung*

Europe and progress: a Slovene post-socialist perspective

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The past and politics enjoy a symbiotic relationship. The continuity of historical development shapes the contemporary (political) moment, and every moment holds a specific perspective of the past. This dichotomy, encompassed in the field of the politics of history, serves as the entry point with which this presentation will try to deepen the understanding of the post-socialist political history of Slovenia. By examining the notion of progress, which was personified by Europe as an ideal at the time, two lines of thought will be pursued. First, the presentation will demonstrate the role and development of the politics of history in post-socialist Slovenia. Second, it will provide a more nuanced understanding of the concept of progress, supported by empirical evidence concerning this specific case. This approach will try to create an alternative to the nationalist narrative of Slovene independence and the post-socialist period, as well as shed new light on the background of Slovene attitudes towards Europe.

Keywords: politics of history, progress, post-socialism, Slovenia, Europe

Spectacles of civilization: a study on the political aesthetics of progress in the late 19th century

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This presentation will show how post-Enlightenment philosophies of history were aesthetically embodied in certain events, institutions, and people as a form of promoting its empty, linear, and imperialist temporality of progress. As a case study, it will present the 1876–77 journeys abroad of Dom Pedro II, the Emperor of Brazil, and the aesthetical and political connotations of his representations worldwide as a progressive and civilized ruler. The emperor's practice of visiting institutions that materialized and displayed progress (museums, universities, factories, etc.) attracted the attention of the international press, which took part in the fashioning and dissemination of that image. Moreover, his personal aversion to pompous royal ceremonies led to the adoption of novel political rituals which would take place in events such as the Centennial Exposition of Philadelphia in the USA, the premier of the Bayreuth Theatre in Germany, and the 3rd edition of the International Congress of Orientalists of Saint Petersburg in the Russian Empire. All these events carried their own ambivalences and temporalities, just like the progressive emperor of a country that was socially and economically based on slave labor. They were fashioned as what I call ceremonies of progress or spectacles of civilization.

Keywords: history of monarchies, progress, civilization, political aesthetics

The post-socialist transition as progress into dependency: the case of Slovenia

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This presentation will problematize the notion of progress from the point of view of the (changing) international integration of the Slovenian economy and its structural position in the global division of labor. To this end, the dependency approach will be used. Going against Rostow's modernization theory of a phase-like unilinear development of national economies towards prosperity, the dependency approach highlights the uneven character of capitalist development, core-periphery relations between national economies, and socially polarizing effects of the integration of peripheral countries into the global production networks that are dominated by multinational corporations. Analyzed from this perspective, Slovenia's recent political-economic trajectory was shaped by the restoration of peripheral capitalism and the transformation of the Slovenian economy into the industrialized periphery of the Eurozone. While these processes helped to restore (instable) economic growth and increase the political and economic importance of certain social groups, they also established constant structural competition pressures on working and social standards, made the economy dependent on external dynamics, and left the Slovenian state with limited capacities to intervene in the domestic accumulation process and capital-labor conflicts.

Keywords: post-socialist transition, international integration, peripheral capitalism, dependency approaches, Slovenia

Journeyman between tradition and modernity

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In the sphere of work, the dialectic of progress is very vivid: modernization brought into the world of labor a greater degree of both freedom and insecurity. This presentation will discuss the ambivalence of progress through the example of journeymen, i.e. skilled artisans that do not have their own workshop, in the western part of the Austrian Empire between roughly 1780 and 1850. In the traditional labor system, every craft had its own customs and traditions, and journeymen possessed a high degree of collective self-confidence and pride in their skill. Industrialization tore masses of people out of traditional bonds, destroyed the old professional identities, and formed large social blocs called classes. The period from the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century was thus characterized by the decline of the status of journeymen. With the rise of market-based labor relations and the widening divergence of interests between masters and journeymen (who were both gradually becoming employers and employees), journeymen began to organize. The presentation will, on the one hand, introduce the phenomena that maintained the traditional order and, on the other hand, present examples of early trade union activities among journeymen.

Keywords: artisans, labor history, working-class movement, traditionalism, radicalism

Exposition 'Technology in the Household' on a way to freedom and progress of the Czech nation at the end of the 19th century

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In the permanent exhibition 'Technology in the Household' at the National Technical Museum in Prague, there is a display of a US sewing machine of the Wheeler-Wilson brand, which was purchased in 1862 by the Czech patriot and founder of the Industrial Museum Vojtěch Náprstek. This museum display was based on the perception of the USA as a *"free democratic society that gave him [Náprstek] the time and opportunity to discover what technological progress meant for the individual. How mechanized routine liberates work."* Products such as the washing machine and various other kitchen utensils played an important role in the ambivalence of modernity: on the one hand, they indeed helped middle- and lower-class workers who could not outsource household care to servants, but on the other hand, they created a new category of consumer goods. Using the example of one museum collection, this presentation will show how the Czech national revival was closely related to the promotion of industrial capitalism and how the idea of industrial progress was pushed into the new lifestyle of bourgeois households in Prague at the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: modernity, museum studies, industrial capitalism, freedom, Czech lands

(Dis)continuity of nationalism and new ideological hierarchies after the 90s: the case of Croatia

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The fall of communism and the breakup of Yugoslavia are often understood as a consequence of the democratization process combined with the 'emergence of nationalism' in the republics that constituted the former SFRY. Although there is some truth to this interpretation, the presentation will argue that there is much more continuity at play, with nationalism being an *al pari* legitimizing ideology of Yugoslavia, right beside socialism. In the case of Croatia in particular, using the institutional historical sociology approach, the presentation will try to show how the preservation of elements of particular ethnic nationalisms on an institutional and cultural level, on the one hand, and the unofficial and often weak project of building a socialist republican nationalism, on the other, resulted in an open political space and laid the institutional ground-work that allowed political actors from the right in the 1990s to redefine the content of nationalism and its place in the ideological hierarchy of the new state.

Keywords: Croatia, ethnic nationalism, socialist nationalism, ideological hierarchies

Has history ended? In defense of a non-teleological, Pinkerian notion of historical progress

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Is human history progressing? If so, is progress inevitable? If not inevitable, is its trajectory at least linear and non-reversible? Much like Steven Pinker and Francis Fukuyama, I answer the first question in the affirmative while denying the second and the third. History is progressing, but it is doing so contingently, unevenly, and with reversals. Progress has been especially notable since the onset of modernity, and structurally speaking, it is likely to continue in the future. Ostensibly, the main proposed contemporary counterpoints to the progress of the last couple of centuries at the empirical level are climate change, rising within-country inequality, the democratic recession, and the rise of a capitalist but illiberal China. While these problems undoubtedly need to be reckoned with, they tend to either be overstated or they have in fact been mostly false for some time now (as is the case, for example, with the claims about rising within-country inequality). This presentation will examine the upsides and downsides of modernity and attempt to directly address the question of progress in human history.

Keywords: end of history, historical progress, teleology, Steven Pinker, Francis Fukuyama

A conceptual history of 'progress' in 20th century German political language

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A fundamental rupture or change in modernity's concept of 'progress' has been variously claimed to have occurred at some point during the 20th century by studies in the fields of temporalities and the future, political ideologies, environmental history, and others. This presentation will use a conceptual history approach to question these hypotheses and investigate the changing understandings and usages of 'progress' in 20th century German political language. To this end, hermeneutical interpretation of parliamentary debates, newspaper articles, publications by politicians, scientists and public intellectuals, dictionary entries, and archival material from social movements are combined with quantitative analysis of large, digitized corpora. This analysis reveals how 'progress' remained a central concept for positioning oneself in the political arena and projecting future-oriented action. Experiences of novel crises or ruptures resulted, for the most part, in distinct patterns of reconceptualizing 'progress' instead of its abandonment.

Keywords: conceptual history, digital history, temporalities, political languages, German contemporary history

Scaling boundaries: women, mountaineering, and the historical ambivalence of the female body

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Societies have held mixed or contradictory views about women's bodies throughout history. This tension can be observed in domains such as art, literature, medicine, and social norms, all of which reveal complex attitudes towards femininity, sexuality, and women's roles. In medieval Europe, for example, women were seen both as paragons of virtue and as sources of temptation. Just as women's bodies were idealized in art and objectified in society, women mountaineers have been celebrated for their achievements while also facing scrutiny over their appearance and adherence to traditional femininity. This presentation will explore the ambivalence towards the female body in historical context, linking it to the experiences of women in mountaineering. From the 19th century, when female pioneers faced societal skepticism, to contemporary climbers challenging gender norms, women's mountaineering has been a powerful arena for redefining femininity. By examining the complex interplay between societal perceptions and women's achievements in mountaineering, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these pioneers have redefined femininity and physical capability over time. The experiences of women in mountaineering provide valuable insights into the broader historical discourse on gender and the female body.

Keywords: gender norms, women's bodies, women's roles, mountaineering, women mountaineers

Postrevolutionary neoabsolutism in Austria and progress

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The middle of the 19th century in the Habsburg Monarchy is a period of significant transformations. The revolution of 1848–49 ended with the establishment of a neoabsolutistic regime that managed to build its legitimacy based on a number of reforms despite being repressive to its opponents. This presentation will discuss the ambivalent character of progress in this regime, which, on the one hand, actively opposed any possibility of revolutionary action, while, on the other hand, started to modernize the Empire with reforms of state bureaucracy and infrastructure. The main focus will be on university students, who experienced this dichotomy very intensely. Because of students' activity during the revolution, the state attempted to control them, but it also accomplished the modern reform of universities. The presentation will be based on a draft of the author's dissertation, which focuses on the everyday life of university students in the middle of the 19th century.

Keywords: 1848 revolution, neoabsolutism, Habsburg Monarchy, progress

The muted communist miracle: Chinese deaf community's fates before and after 1949

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In the Chinese government's narrative of deaf history in the mid-20th century, the victory of the communist revolution in 1949 promoted the expansion of deaf people's citizenship in the 1950s. Revising the progress of deaf activism in pre-1949 China, this presentation attempts to transcend the hearing-predominated and progressive narrative in three sections. The first section provides an overview of the emergence of the Chinese deaf community and its social activism in the 1930s and 1940s. Due to the development of deaf education in the early 20th century, a generation of well-educated deaf community leaders emerged who were dedicated to struggling for the right to education and eligibility for political election. However, their eagerness for public engagement was oppressed in the 1950s. While the newborn communist government advocated for public deaf education and employment for deaf youth, their public participation was prohibited. As a result, deaf people were discursively transformed into a group of disadvantaged and dependent populations. Reviewing the trajectory of the deaf community in mid-20th century Chinese society, the final section rethinks the advance of ability underlying the social miracle. By contrasting the Chinese deaf community's fates before and after 1949, the presentation seeks to revise the obsolete and ableist narrative of deaf history.

Keywords: deaf, China, communist revolution, miracle, ableism

Progress for whom? Roma, Sinti, and the broken promise of the 1848 bourgeois revolution in the Habsburg Empire

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This presentation will pluralize the notion of progress through a consideration of the consequences of the 1848 revolution for the Romani and Sinti imperial subjects in the Habsburg Empire. It will explain how the abolishment of serfdom, the empire's first Constitution, and the reconstruction of absolutist rule altered the economic, socio-political, and legal contexts in which Romani and Sinti imperial subjects led their lives. On the economic side, the emancipation of serfs, the land reform, and the enclosure of commons exponentially increased pressures on the landless Roma and Sinti. On the political side, the short-lived Constitution opened a horizon of possibilities in which some Habsburg Roma and Sinti petitioned for national equality in 1850, only to be met with a punitive legislative framework in 1851 that initiated a new conjuncture in anti-Roma punitive governance. These transformations ossified specific structural limitations on Romani and Sinti mobility and constituted the core of anti-Roma structural racism in the Habsburg Empire.

Keywords: Roma, Sinti, Habsburg Empire, 1848 revolution, March Constitution, emancipation

Political discontinuities and transformations in the case of journalism in the period of transition: from self-governing socialism to (neo)liberal democracy

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The author's research focuses on journalistic professionalism and the conditions, e.g. work and career advancement, that imply the (im)possibility of achieving journalistic professional standards on the one hand, and the active creation of a journalistic space of autonomy and professional integrity within the Yugoslav system on the other. This presentation will reflect on the question of progress that has taken place in the field of journalism both in the SFRY and after the transition to (neo)liberal democracy. The following two aspects of these issues will be emphasized. 1) Ambiguity or contradiction in the case of journalism in the SFRY: for example, precisely because politics considered journalism as one of the fundamental subjective forces of the system, one of the consequences was that journalists had an extremely high status and reputation, especially compared with today. This is closely related to the question of journalistic autonomy and professionalism. 2) The reflections will be formulated in comparative form: What happened to journalism during the transition process and especially afterwards, in the changing social and political landscape? The analysis will highlight the changes in the political economy of journalism and its normative transformations with the entry into the multi-party system and (neo)liberal democracy.

Keywords: journalistic autonomy, journalistic professionalism, socialist Yugoslavia, transition period



