

REDISCOVERING THE SOUL OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

Jonathan Rowson

If there is going to be a progressive alliance, it has to be about more than political marketing. Being a progressive is not just about being a socialist with a makeover, a social democrat looking to downsize to one word, a green seeking a larger palette, a civic nationalist looking to appear civil, or a liberal who cares about more than freedom.

Instead, we're looking for deeper conceptions of progress that are inclusive, viable and inspiring enough for diverse interests to coalesce around and campaign for. We won't create that idea of progress by committee, but we may get there if we look beyond partisan affiliation and get personal in the right way. Your *personal* idea of progress matters, not just because you can find yourself by fighting for it, but because, as the early feminists foresaw, the personal is usually more political than it looks.

While many take progress for granted, the philosopher John Gray is probably the most persuasive contemporary voice for a long history of (mostly conservative) political thought that argues

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progress may not extend beyond the scientific and the technological: ‘The myth is that the progress achieved in science and technology can occur in ethics, politics or, more simply, civilisation. The myth is that the advances made in civilisation can be the basis for a continuing, cumulative improvement.’

Gray’s point is not that we never make progress. Wars end in peace. Billions escape poverty. Literacy spreads. Beautiful works of art are created. Emancipation seems inexorable. But such gains are extremely fragile, and often offset by losses elsewhere. The global economy appears to be stable and growing, then the financial crash and recession happens. Nations meet their climate change targets, but global emissions continue to rise. We think we’ve stopped torturing people, but then pictures from Abu Ghraib emerge. We have long since abolished state sanctioned slavery, but *de facto* economic slavery remains ubiquitous. We hope world wars are a thing of the past, but nuclear bombs are built, terrorism spreads and ISIS cut people’s heads off, using *technological progress* to amplify their barbarism. The progress of civilisation is not a given. Indeed, there is a case for not believing in it.

A LARGER LIFE

What then, are we striving for? Which way is north on our compass? The political theorist Roberto Unger offered a helpful touchstone for progress in an interview for the BBC Radio 4 programme *Analysis*: ‘A progressive is someone who wants to see society reorganised, part-by-part and step-by-step, so that ordinary men and women have a better chance to live a larger life.’

A larger life. I believe this idea is a good lodestar for progressives

to unite around because it is capacious, deep and generative. Unger's conception of larger life is 'a life of greater scope, greater capability and greater intensity', and that's not so difficult to comprehend. We can all do and be more, with growing aptitude and wisdom, and experience life more fully and deeply as a result. Of course, that means we need ecological viability, a place to live, work to do, and the education and time to do it, but those things are the technocratic means to the experiential ends that ultimately matter.

Unger says 'to die only once' is the heart of his vision, not to suffer many small deaths in daily frustrations, but to continually overcome and thereby live fully, dying only at the end. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke puts it, 'The purpose of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things.'

Talk of larger lives and dying only once will not directly win general elections, but we should be equally wary of ignoring the political power of such philosophical ideas. Impatience to act is often a form of ethical cowardice and epistemological panic. Throughout Europe, social democratic parties are struggling to rediscover their sense of purpose, and that's partly, I think, because we are a little scared of ourselves – scared of what we'll see if we look closer at what really matters to us, and why.

WHAT IS MOST PERSONAL IS MOST UNIVERSAL

The psychotherapist and humanist Carl Rogers said that what is most personal is most universal, so let me start there; not because I have a particularly edifying biography, but because one thing progressives can be sure to have in common is a case history that

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formed our idea of progress. For me, the main ingredient in personal freedom will always be interdependence.

I was born in Aberdeen in 1977, during the Cold War. My father is an artist who became schizophrenic and latterly a ‘Care in the Community’ success story. I was raised partly by my extended family but mostly by a working single mother who climbed from nursery teacher to Head of Educational Services in North Ayrshire. My parents separated, we moved house a lot, and I took refuge in chess, later becoming a Grandmaster and professional player. I’m a type-one diabetic deeply dependent on the NHS and I gained entry to Oxford University via comprehensive schools. I watched my father’s two commercially astute brothers thrive in Thatcher’s Britain, but I was closer to my maternal grandfather, who worked in a granite quarry, bet on horses, and fed me stovies.

I grew up amidst ambient invective against ‘the Tories’. Now, as an educated adult, I am impressed by some aspects of classical Conservative thought, have many Tory friends, and I even admire some Conservative politicians, but personally I could never vote for them. They will always be, with all due consideration and affection, ‘the bastards’.

So I welcome the premise of this book, not merely to unite *against* a shared opponent, but to share what we might also unite *for* by clarifying what it means to share the progressive cause. In this collection, some are focused on the proximate target of winning the next general election, perhaps through some kind of progressive coalition. The ultimate target, however, is the prevailing ideology of our time in which inequality is a not a problem but a design feature, climate change is noted but disavowed, the shrinking public sphere is celebrated not mourned, and democracy is thinly understood as a last resort against tyranny, not as a form of life.

It is in that broader ideological context, and not just the immediate political one, that we need to keep on asking: what does it mean to be progressive?

POLITICAL HOPE

If being a progressive means anything, it means having political hope. Progress may not be constant, linear or easy, but a progressive believes things can get better, and that such progress can be ‘continuing and cumulative’ in Gray’s terms. The world is better on balance now than it was 100 years ago, says the progressive, and though challenges are legion, bit by bit we can make it still better 100 years from now.

But such progress sounds obtuse in the context of ambient debt and the urgency of climate change, and it won’t happen if we don’t try. In this sense, progressives are defined by being proactive. They would take issue with Michael Oakeshott’s idea that thinking our way to societal solutions is somehow hubristic. Established institutions should be given some benefit of the doubt, but they still have to prove their worth. There is great wisdom in the House of Lords, and perhaps even in the idea of an unelected second chamber, but that doesn’t mean we can’t replace it with something much better. Being progressive means you are not content to let things unfold, trusting in providence. You feel you have some *responsibility* for changing the world.

And it goes beyond that, because while all politicians want ‘change’ of some kind, progressivism is about more than incremental tinkering. Political hope is grounded in visions of wholesale transformation and renewal – not merely change, but changing the

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way things change. Progressives seek new social, political and economic structures, rather than just trying to optimise outcomes on the basis of existing ones. That's why constitutional and electoral reform is a defining aspect of most progressive policy platforms – if all the axioms and algorithms remain the same, you'll keep making the same mistakes.

Progressive imagination is premised on worlds with safe and sound ecologies, which all but the greener elements tend to take for granted too often – there is a constructive tension here that the UK's recent carbon net zero target should bring to the surface. But most progressive visions feature societies that are above all more equal: in opportunity, outcome, and ideally both. To be progressive is to place a high value on sharing the bounties of life on principle, but also for morale and collective dignity. '*Progressive taxation*' is appropriately named in this sense, but several decades of political and economic learning mean we know we cannot rely on this instrument alone.

Anthony Painter, the political writer and director of policy at the Royal Society of Arts, says the minimal conditions for being a progressive are being a liberal and a social democrat. That translates as a commitment to individual rights and a belief in the value of a mixed economy. This framing explains why being progressive has been defined largely through being 'anti-austerity' in recent years. Fighting major cuts to public expenditure is grounded in recognition that such services are necessary to militate against the inequalities of opportunity built into the market, and that losing them often undermines individual rights and freedoms.

Being a progressive therefore means *not* being a neoliberal, who valorises the market and deeply distrusts government, caring principally for aggregate wealth in abstraction and not the imbalances

of power and inequalities in welfare that result. Progressives believe governments have an important role to play in redressing the unfairness and negative externalities of markets, but the state is only part of the story. More generally they tend to be animated by all the other freedoms of association and expression that democracy affords.

Less obviously, and perhaps contentiously, being a progressive means *not* being a communitarian. While many progressives value solidarity and often campaign in solidaristic ways, enhancing individual autonomy remains a central objective. Yes, they may be fighting for class interests or the common good of particular communities, but usually because of the life chances of individuals that depend upon them. When people on the right say ‘progressive’ is just a socially acceptable term for ‘socialist’, they overlook that a qualified respect for individual freedom and markets are legitimate points of divergence.

Progressives can freely acknowledge that capitalism is by far the best way to generate wealth, but should be just as resolute in arguing that it’s a terrible way to distribute and channel it. In all cases, being progressive looks like a middle way; the desired economy is neither unfettered capitalism nor old fashioned socialism, and the desired society is neither painfully atomised nor stiflingly communal.

It’s no surprise, then, that in terms of the conventional political spectrum, ‘progressive’ can meaningfully apply to everything from the relatively innovative and compassionate end of ‘one nation conservatism’, through all the Liberal Democrat tribes, past most forms of civic nationalism, beyond the Greens, all the way to the soft centres of the hard left. Put like that, it looks like a centrist political project. Who would have thought that being a progressive could mean being a conformist?

IDEAS OF PROGRESS

But we have forgotten something. Beyond sharing an egalitarian disposition and an emphasis on social justice, progressives can and do differ in how they give content to the idea of progress. It is here that there is great scope to be radical. Although it is sometimes pictured as an arrow pointing left, being progressive is arguably a way of *not* being left-wing or right-wing. Progressivism questions the validity of a political spectrum that views our relationship to the state as the pivotal issue and thereby relegates other major aspects of political life, for instance movement building, networks, values, agency, media, finance, technology, ecology.

There are many forks in the road at this point. Perhaps we need a deeper engagement with the way technology determines political and economic outcomes, intrigued by blockchain technology and inspired by the American philosopher Jaron Lanier's increasingly pivotal question: who owns information? You might want to believe in green growth, but unless you can tell a credible story of absolute decoupling of growth from emissions with sufficient speed to safeguard our habitat, the key question might be making post-growth economics work. If you think nothing happens without relationships, and that the requisite changes will come from forging new forms of networks, Compass are developing work in this space. If you feel we need to democratise the experience, expression and rewards of creativity, the Royal Society of Arts now build their work around 'the power to create'. All these progressive stories are relevant and there are many other stories to be told. There are also those witty 'unknown unknowns', who will no doubt change the agenda.

A progressive, then, is somebody who believes in progress, fuelled by political hope and informed by a vision of ecological

sanity, democratic renewal, inclusive economies and human development. The kind of progressive you are is mostly about what gives you that experience of political hope.

SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF PROGRESSIVE REVIVAL

Speaking personally, my political hope comes from the Gandhian ideal of trying to be the change we want to see in the world. This particular aspiration does not seem to me to be optional, which means the progressive challenge is to spread the kinds of human *experience* that we most value, including the experiences of meaning, development and direction, forged and expressed through our social and political engagement.

I therefore think it's time for progressives to speak about experience as such, in the explicit and evocative terms we need to cut through ambient distraction – the language, for instance, of the deepest currents of life: love, death, self and soul. When Russell Brand said the problem is 'primarily spiritual and secondarily political' it was a minor tragedy for progressive thought that this timeless message was subsumed by its messenger.

Whenever there is uneasiness with language, progressives should remind themselves of the contention by another American philosopher, Richard Rorty, that 'a talent for speaking differently, rather than arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change'. If progressivism is to be more than political conformity masquerading as radicalism, and if we are to convincingly argue against the likes of John Gray, we need to find the courage to speak differently, not least about the spiritual content in the idea of progress. (For more on this, see Carys Afoko, page 318.)

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As author of a recent report on reimagining spirituality, I know this emphasis is vague and awkward for many, but that awkwardness can be viewed as grit in the oyster. To reconnect personal transformation and political transformation, we may need to move closer to the edge of our comfort zones to reclaim ownership of the language of the spiritual. After all, the most celebrated political progressives of all time – Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela – are defined precisely by the spiritual content of their political commitment. Their struggles and victories show that this confluence of spiritual and political is not about quietism but about activism. You come to know who you are, and what matters most in life, through your efforts to bring about the world you want to live in.

As Unger puts it in *The Self Awakened*, ‘If spirit is a name for the resistant and transcending faculties of the agent, we can spiritualise society. We can diminish the distance between who we are and what we find outside of ourselves.’

Diminish the distance between who we are and what we find outside of ourselves? Who would have thought we’d end up with *this* challenge when we asked what it means to be a progressive? But now that we’re here, what’s stopping us?

AESTHETIC UNITY

That question is not merely rhetorical. Two of the biggest things that need to be unlearned are how to approach issues often unhelpfully deemed ‘environmental’ and the awkwardness felt over sentiments that are broadly spiritual. To put that more positively, how will those who are ambivalent about seemingly ‘green’ issues

come to realise that they lie at the heart of economic and social renewal? And how can we make democratic politics feel less transactional and more soulful; less like an episodic ritual, and more like a meaningful form of life?

I believe the answer to both questions lies in understanding and creating ‘aesthetic unity’. We need visions of progress that are beautiful enough to make us feel whole as we work towards them. Aesthetic unity sounds abstract but is deeply visceral; it’s what we feel and sense in a good book, a good film, a good song. In a moment I’ll use the Yes campaign of the Scottish referendum as a political example, but the renowned ecologist Gregory Bateson frames the broader challenge like this:

Mere purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life ... Our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake ... more serious than all those minor insanities that characterise those older epistemologies which agreed upon the fundamental unity.

Bateson’s concern here is the relationship between knowledge and purpose in a post-religious landscape. Some aspects of religious belief may be ‘minor insanities’, but the major insanity – one many of us suffer from – is to live without a consciously chosen myth or meta-narrative to serve as a touchstone for the myriad details of our lives. In so doing we either lose our way, or latch on to one unconsciously like ‘growth’ or ‘the market’.

‘Mere purposive rationality unaided’ was arguably part of what lost Labour the 2015 general election. The so-called retail offers were not enough because they lacked any overarching vision.

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In contrast, ‘Long-term economic plan’ may not float your boat, but it has a form of aesthetic unity that millions bought into.

Creating a progressive sense of aesthetic unity is not easy, but is perhaps the defining challenge of our time. The erosion of institutions – churches, unions, political parties – matters because the fragmentation and diffusion of authoritative knowledge leaves the notion of purpose orphaned. When something we sense should be collective, intuitive and visceral becomes atomised, partial and contentious, we feel fundamentally lost. This sense of being lost, unmoored, simultaneously saturated with meaning and mythically deprived, is arguably also the root cause of growing mental health problems – another reason for spiritual life to be a more central progressive cause.

Whatever the value of religion in channelling civic energy, there can be no naive turning back to it as a source of political power. To be meaningful, and therefore ‘work’, the frame we need has to connect with every aspect of us, which is why it needs an aesthetic dimension.

Rediscovering aesthetic unity matters because the external world is undermining the stability and coherence of the forms of personal identity that shape political activism beyond single-issue protests. We are no longer in a traditional world where roles were clear, norms were given and political tribes knew themselves ideologically.

At the time of writing, in May 2016, our relational, institutional and cultural references are increasingly porous and malleable. We are asked to play multiple roles and feel obliged to have opinions on multiple issues that we barely understand or, on reflection, really care about. As the political scientist Peter Grosvenor put it, ‘Disoriented denizens of neoliberal societies may look for satisfying

and durable identities in, for example, nostalgic, reactionary, nationalist, or fundamentalist ideas and movements. More commonly, they seek solace in consumerism.⁷

To make sense of how to regain our own sense of wholeness, we need to realise that we are in some ways victims of a wholeness that was not of our own choosing. However pernicious and harmful it may be, neoliberalism has its own kind of aesthetic unity: markets deliver utility in the form of growth and profits, private interests trump and ultimately subsume the common good, market norms are efficient and productive and therefore helpful in every sphere of life. Such ideas may be utterly wrong or immoral, but they have their own internal consistency, which makes them appear like common sense to the unreflective citizen, and allows attacks on particular policy parts (e.g. ‘abolish the bedroom tax’) to be absorbed by the ideological whole (e.g. ‘live within your means’).

In Rowan Williams’s review of Michael Sandel’s book *What Money Can’t Buy*, he pinpoints the core critique of excessive marketisation and points towards forms of resistance as follows:

The fundamental model being assumed here is one in which a set of unconditioned wills negotiate control of a passive storehouse of commodities, each of them capable of being reduced to a dematerialised calculus of exchange value. If anything could be called a ‘world-denying’ philosophy, this is it ... a possible world of absolute commodification. If we want to resist this intelligently, we need doctrine, ritual and narrative: sketches of the normative, practices that are not just functions, and stories of lives that communicate a sense of what being at home in the environment looks like – and the costs of failure as well.

YES!

Williams refers to the need for ‘stories of lives that communicate a sense of what being at home in the environment looks like’. Here again I think we have to plunge into personal experience. As a Scot, I am not alone in finding the campaign for an independent Scotland politically transformative. Whatever your view of the objective we sought, that *experience* offers a clue about what progressive renewal might look like. For a few months leading up to the vote in September 2014, I was fortunate to find myself advising some senior members of the Yes campaign, and reached an alacritous audience through one of the main online platforms in Scotland, Bella Caledonia. That summer, politics felt meaningful in a way that it rarely does, and life as such was revitalised by a constitutional question in which I had a stake and a voice.

What happened to me happened to many others too. Amidst the clamour of the debate about the future, the daily experience of the campaign offered glimpses of meaningful integration – of the myriad aspects of life somehow coalescing. Fundamentally we were parts in search of a whole. Scotland – the nation as such – was abstract and porous and loveable enough to help us transcend policy contention, acting as a lodestar for our memories, identifications and projections.

But that’s only part of it. The deeper point, I think, is that many loved the prospect of an independent country not in spite of fears but *because* of them. I certainly had huge doubts, as I wrote in *The Guardian* at the time:

There is something horrifying about the wilful destruction of a relationship that has evolved over centuries to a unique state

of geopolitical complexity. There are troubling questions about technocratic imponderables, a palpable sense of guilt and betrayal about the prospective loss of kinship with fellow Brits, and a sense of anti-heroic embarrassment about the pragmatism of a British currency union. And while I do see a path towards a revitalised social democracy, at ease with ourselves and our place in the world, I don't see us getting there for a decade at least. I see lots of risk along the way, huge scope for regret and inevitable heartache. It all feels so unnecessary.

And yet, I was drawn by a sense of courage in the body that told me such matters were not fundamental. I sensed aesthetic unity in the idea of an independent Scotland in a way I regrettably didn't in the UK. I wanted my country to have creative agency, to be free to make its own mistakes and form relationships on its own terms, and I felt that this risk – and it was a risk – was worth taking. I felt sure that my beliefs did not have to be conclusive to be valid; I *felt* that nations are not negligible things; that statehood is their necessary maturity; that facing and overcoming fears is what it means to grow, and that growing is what we should all be trying to do.

The centrality of this point was brought home to me on the BBC's *Question Time* in the referendum's aftermath. One of the foremost Yes campaigners, the journalist Lesley Riddoch, was asked whether it was time to accept the final result and draw a line under the constitutional question. She acknowledged the result but qualified that with a remark that went much deeper:

The level of activism, the commitment, the imagination, the friendship, the camaraderie ... It was the best year of my life; from the point of view of the humanity and optimism that was

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generated. If you were a part of that ... it's so precious, it's so unusual, that you really feel you do not want to see that go. Particularly younger people, older people, people in estates, people who are not usually involved.

POLITICAL COURAGE

This notion that the experience of courage is politically pivotal reminds me of the story (which can be appreciated figuratively) that, when we die and reach the gates of heaven, God will ask us, 'Where are your wounds?' And if we say, 'I have no wounds,' we will be asked, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for?'

What then are the things we deeply believe in but lack the courage to advocate? What are the things that we know to be risky, but that we value *because* the risk makes us feel like we are doing something worthwhile?

Opposition to Trident renewal is a bit like that. Advocating shorter working weeks is like that. Proposing a universal minimum income is like that. Campaigning for a post-growth economy is like that. There are many more such policies, but I think their flavour is clear. We need a range of big systemic ideas where we see ourselves as part of a big and beautiful whole; where we feel the fear and do it anyway. If a progressive alliance is going to succeed and endure in the UK, it will need to have soul, which means building aesthetic unity and finding political courage.

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where he led a range of influential projects on social innovation, spirituality and climate change. His book, entitled *The Seven Dimensions of Climate Change: Rethinking the World's Toughest Problem*, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in early 2017.

FURTHER READING

Rowson, Jonathan, *Spiritualise: Revitalising Spirituality to address 21st Century Challenges*. RSA: 2014. Available online: <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/spiritualise-report.pdf>.

The final output of a two-year thought leadership project involving over 300 people featuring a range of public and private events. Most of the report tries to clarify the meaning and function of the spiritual and the final section unpacks the connection between the spiritual and the political.

Unger, Roberto, BBC Radio 4 *Analysis*, 18 November 2013. Programme available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03hvn6n>

Transcript available: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/20131118_analysis_robertounger.pdf

The political philosopher is interviewed about what it means to be 'a progressive' at LSE and unpacks his notion of reorganising society so that more people can live what he calls 'a larger life' in which they 'die only once'.

Rowson, Jonathan, 'As an exile I can't vote in Scotland's referendum, but I know I'd vote yes', *The Guardian*, 2014. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/09/scotland-refendum-yes-economy-confidence>

My rationale for deciding to support the Yes campaign in the Scottish independence referendum, and how it related to political courage and 'the sanctity of personal power'.

Bateson, Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: An Investigation Into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred*, Rider Books: 1987.

The idea of 'aesthetic unity' is introduced here in a dialogue between father and daughter, two extraordinary transdisciplinary thinkers known for their work on cybernetics, ecology and metaphor.

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‘John Gray says human progress is a myth’, interview with Johannes Niederhauser, *Vice Magazine*, 2013. Available online: https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/john-gray-interview-atheism

The original source for John Gray’s quotation on the myth of progress.

Rowson, Jonathan, ‘Why our Politics needs to be more spiritual’, *Prospect* magazine, 2015. Available online: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/life/why-our-politics-needs-to-be-more-spiritual>