Values and principles for social progress

To comprehensively assess the social progress of some locality, nation, or the globe, how many different evaluative dimensions does one need? Nothing important should be left out. Some dimensions might potentially be reduced to others. Items important only as to other ends may be dropped; for instance, economic growth is merely a means to enhancing individual welfare and security and the society’s ability to secure people’s basic needs and promote cultural goods. Some items may be reasonably grouped together under one rubric; for instance, avoiding hunger and promoting health might be grouped as basic needs. Together with thirteen colleagues from around the world who collaborated on the framing normative chapter of the IPSP’s report, Rethinking Society for the 21st Century,1 we identified and defended twenty-one values and principles irreducibly relevant to assessing social progress—coincidentally, 21 for the 21st.

Suppose that one seeks to judge the extent to which China has made social progress between 1950 and today. To do that, it suffices to make, as best one can, a relevant assessment of Chinese society at each of these two points in time. And, as almost always happens, a society that moves forward in many respects may also move backward in some. Yet costs endured only in the intervening time raise a different issue. If some of the intervening work to achieve social progress came at great cost, but relatively temporary cost that does not directly affect this retrospective assessment of progress—say, because some of the gains resulted indirectly from some of the harsher abuses of the Cultural Revolution—one could aptly say, “much progress was achieved, but at considerable cost”. By contrast, if one looks forward, and assesses alternative policies as pathways for making social progress, one will have reason to treat some of the expected interim costs in a different way. Suppose that laissez-faire treatment of expanding agribusiness would boost economic growth in India between now and 2030, but at the cost of severely threatening the subcontinent’s already depleted supplies of groundwater, one could argue that this cost provides strong reason for taking that option off the table.

To be sure, some of this cost will be felt by those alive in 2030, but it will also cause trouble for a long time afterwards. Our diverse group of authors quickly agreed on the outlines of our approach. We would be guided by a fundamental commitment to the equal dignity of each human being and a respect for the deep pluralism, around the world, of views about values, morality, and religion. We agreed to eschew any trace of the Enlightenment faith that human society is destined to progress. We also rejected the related thought that there is some single, privileged pathway to social progress. Instead, we intended our catalog of dimensions of social progress simply to support the kinds of retrospective evaluation and prospective policy choices described in the previous paragraph. To reflect the difference between simple evaluative dimensions and ones that register the kinds of costs that may put some options off the table, we distinguished between fundamental principles, which have this extra feature, and fundamental values, which do not. To avoid redundancy, we sought to limit ourselves to values and principles of non-derivative importance: ones whose importance cannot securely be derived from some other value or principle. In the end, we offer two orienting, cross-cutting principles, nine fundamental values, and ten fundamental principles (see fig.1). Intent on gauging those who are doing more deeply into specific social issues—issues including both policy-makers and other scholars—we thought it best to err on the side of including a dimension.

Why so many dimensions? Many economists will be used to admitting just two: welfare and distributive justice. Notoriously, focusing solely on maximizing total (or average) welfare is compatible with fostering unacceptable levels of economic inequality. It might be thought that once justice has been added to welfare, these two dimensions are enough. After all, the idea of welfare or well-being is quite capacious. The subjectivist approach to the idea of welfare that was dominant in economics through the middle of the last century is giving way to more substantive understandings of well-being. This shift is in no small part due to Amartya Sen’s pioneering development of the capability approach, which distinguishes multiple dimensions of well-being. Taking advantage of this development, the 2009 report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Flotuss Commission focused on just two main dimensions: well-being and sustainability.2 Yet the dimension of well-being, its authors suggested, could in turn be broken down into eight subdimensions (material living standards, health, education, occupational activities, participation in social capital, and governance, social connections and relationships, environment, and justice). This report did not ignore distributive justice, but made a rather strained effort to suggest that it could be accounted for under the heading of political voice and governance (as if there existed any system of governance that both gives the people a serious voice and guarantees that measures generating unjust inequalities will not be adopted). In our chapter of the IPSP report, we instead pulled out distributive justice for detailed separate treatment.

The treatment of sustainability in the Stiglitz-Sen-Flotuss report valuably emphasized the importance of keeping track of capital stocks, including stocks of social capital. Remember that progress is naturally judged by comparing things at two different points in time; rather than being cumulative, all the data over a long period. Looking at capital stocks importantly adds to the time-slices that are in a way that matches a society’s resilience—the likelihood that it will withstand shocks and support future improvement.

We implicitly distinguish three different kinds of social capital, broadly understood. First, and most abstractly, it characterizes the value of security not as itself an element of well-being but as a contextually-assured robustness in people’s enjoyment of its elements—a robustness that will withstand at least many types of misfortune. Security of this kind requires that settled practices and agreements are in place to help people when they get in trouble—with their health, for example.

Second, the dimension of social relations is worth recognizing as an independent dimension in part because it combines present enjoyment with a set of informal practices that embody social capital. If an innovative form of social media or an addictive new video game erodes social relations in a given society, even if the short-term effect on people’s enjoyment is a wash, the weakened social relations would underscore people’s resilience in dealing with unexpected setbacks. It would tend to deprive people of support networks. For this reason, the value of good social relations is not well captured in the current well-being accounts. Additional, of course, there is a strong case for thinking of friendships and various other healthy forms of social relations, which in their nature go beyond a single individual, as being valuable for their own sakes.

Third, the dimension of cultural goods similarly combines intrinsic value, current enjoyment, and a significant standing as a social capital. In characterizing this dimension, we had in mind quite broadly the fruits of scientific endeavor, insights of creative and scholarly reflection, stores of memories and historical knowledge, and diverse modes of artistic and religious expression. Each of these builds up over many centuries, with innovations sometimes erasing and writing over what came before but always building on it. Because the well-being and the potential progress of future generations depend in important respects on the current generation’s guardianship of this heritage, and because, again, the concept of progress suggests that we compare two time-slices, the value of cultural goods should be recognized as a distinct dimension for judging social progress. If a society achieved high well-being at an indigenously well-established set of cultural relations and enhancement of its cultural heritage, this neglect ought to count against its claim to having progressed.

These last two dimensions, social relations and cultural goods, come together in an interesting way in the Chinese regime’s attempts to cope with the downsides of modernization. It has been widely noted over the past decade that the regime has at least been exploring the revival of Confucianism as a means of combating the normless individualism that has come from rapid industrialization and broadening capitalism and exacerbated by the one-child policy. These changes have somewhat eroded the familial ties that had traditionally been central to social relations in China. Rebuilding social relations in a way that fosters solidarity (another of our fundamental values) over individualism is no easy thing to do. A nation cannot simply import, lock, stock, and barrel, ways of living life that have worked elsewhere. The relevant types of informal social practice need to put down roots organically, a process that takes a very long time. Hence, it makes perfect sense that the Chinese regime, in seeking to combat the ill effects of excessive individualism arising from modernity, turned to an indigenously well-established set of cultural norms: the Confucian tradition.
Dimensions for Evaluating Social Progress

Cross-cutting, orienting principles

– The principle of equal dignity
– Respect for pluralism

Basic values

– Well-being
– Freedom
– Non-alienation
– Solidarity
– Social relations
– Esteem and recognition
– Cultural Goods
– Environmental Values
– Security

Basic Principles

– Of general applicability:
  – Basic rights
  – Distributive justice
  – Beneficence and generosity

Applicable to governments:

– The rule of law
– Transparency and accountability
– Democracy
– Giving rights determinate reality

Applicable to civil society:

– Toleration
– Educating and supporting citizens

Applicable to global institutions:

– Global justice

with its emphasis on fillial piety and ritual propriety.4 Whether such an effort can work in a society where democracy is another matter. Institutions may be looked at in the same light, for they cannot be set up overnight, and often need to exist for generations before they earn the trust of those who participate in them and interact with them. In introducing the distinction between values and principles, above, we focused on a moral-philosophical distinction: when looking forward, principles serve to put options off the table in a way that values do not. That is in part because principles directly indicate how some agent should or should not act, whereas values do so only via some process or principle of weighing or reasoning. Seven of our principles are framed as applying only to a specific range of human institutions: to governments, to civil society, and to global institutions. Principles are especially at home in application to institutions, for institutions are themselves constituted on the basis of rule or principles. Consider the role of the principle of the rule of law in characterizing the core requirements of a well-functioning legal system. Governments typically rest on constitutions, written or unwritten, that give them shape. Civil society, being so heterogeneous, is less obviously rule-constituted than either governments or the law; but civil society arguably exists only as the backdrop of a government that is at least minimally effective and that sufficiently protects basic liberties for a diversity of civil-society organizations to arise. One of our chapter’s principles, relevant to assessing a society’s progress, is the principle of democracy: all governments should be democratic. Given the size of modern nations, democracy therein must clearly be indirect, involving the election of representatives, rather than assembling all citizens for a large meeting. Democracy is important to treating citizens as free and equal persons, which calls for giving them a role in ruling themselves. To allow citizens to do so in a way that allows them to express even one another’s opinions, the process should afford them an opportunity to give and to hear one another’s reasons for and against alternative laws or policies.5 In discussing this, we emphasized that the idea of democracy has roots all around the world. For example, legislators were elected in Ashoka’s India.6 In Africa, the Oromo people of Ethiopia developed a complex democratic process involving a system of checks and balances.7

Relatedly, there is no uniquely preferred way to implement democracy. Different forms of democracy will be appropriate in different places. This was made vivid to me when I participated in a conference in Paro, Bhutan in 2009 on Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia.8 One point brought home to me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic, but the king, King Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thrifty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists’ state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

Just as there is no one privileged path to democracy, there is also no one privileged way to combine the twenty-one dimensions so as to reach an overall assessment of achieved or expected progress or decline. It will be said that weights (or more sophisticated aggregating functions) need to be applied to the dimensions in order to produce an overall score. That doing this is sometimes useful is easy to see when we are interested in comparing, say, the competitive incentives generated by the Human Development Index’s rankings, with the UN.D.P. But this is just one simple use of a multi-dimensional understanding of how well a society is doing. For many purposes, it will not be enough. If one is analyzing how a society is doing, it is important to work first to specify some or all of the dimensions more fully before doing any aggregation or assessment.

Generalizing the line of thought just suggested about the local adaptability of the ideas of democracy, for some purposes it might be apt for locally appropriate specifications first to be reached before any weights are contemplated. In every dimension, there are many contexts – both in policy-making and in social-scientific study – in which there is no need to attempt to aggregate the range of values and principles that would be relevant to judging a society’s overall progress. Our compass chapter was intended in part to be of use to the authors of the twenty chapters that follow ours in the psp report, and to other humanists and social scientists working in their wake. These chapters cover a huge diversity of topics, including cities, the future of wars and violence, media and communications, democracy, families, health, and education. Different ones of our twenty-one values and principles will be salient in each of these distinct areas of concern. While doing scholarly work or policy assessment on one of those issues, it will be perfectly apt to select the dimensions most worthy of attention and to elaborate them, as needed, by specifying them or disaggregating them. For instance, work on assessing individual deprivation will sensibly set aside the dimensions that apply only to collective or institutional achievement and will disaggregate the broad measure I use as to bring to bear more detailed data. In principle, however, all twenty-one dimensions are relevant to overall assessments of social progress, both positively and negatively impacted, intentionally or not, by the actions taken or policies adopted in any arena. This is of course true of effects on well-being and distributive justice; but it is true of the other nineteen dimensions as well.

The compass chapter is a first attempt to frame the idea of social progress implied by the multiple dimensions needed to capture it also indicates that the idea of democracy can be translated into different sorts of social progress in different places. By differently interpreting the various dimensions and differentially prioritizing them, nations may arrive at their own conceptions of progress. What is to be evaluated, thought, is so doing. To me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic, but the king, King Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thrifty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists’ state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

This is of course true of effects on well-being and distributive justice; but it is true of the other nineteen dimensions as well. The compass chapter is a first attempt to frame the idea of social progress implied by the multiple dimensions needed to capture it also indicates that the idea of democracy can be translated into different sorts of social progress in different places. By differently interpreting the various dimensions and differentially prioritizing them, nations may arrive at their own conceptions of progress. What is to be evaluated, thought, is so doing. To me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic, but the king, King Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thrifty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists’ state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

This is of course true of effects on well-being and distributive justice; but it is true of the other nineteen dimensions as well. The compass chapter is a first attempt to frame the idea of social progress implied by the multiple dimensions needed to capture it also indicates that the idea of democracy can be translated into different sorts of social progress in different places. By differently interpreting the various dimensions and differentially prioritizing them, nations may arrive at their own conceptions of progress. What is to be evaluated, thought, is so doing. To me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic, but the king, King Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thrifty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists’ state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

This is of course true of effects on well-being and distributive justice; but it is true of the other nineteen dimensions as well. The compass chapter is a first attempt to frame the idea of social progress implied by the multiple dimensions needed to capture it also indicates that the idea of democracy can be translated into different sorts of social progress in different places. By differently interpreting the various dimensions and differentially prioritizing them, nations may arrive at their own conceptions of progress. What is to be evaluated, thought, is so doing. To me was that the United States could be described as being stuck with Democracy 1.0, with all its faults. Given how hard it is for the U.S. to amend its constitution, we essentially cannot upgrade. Newer democracies have a chance to design democracy better, and in ways that suit their circumstances. Bhutan, being a monarchy, is by no means fully democratic, but the king, King Emperor Ashoka before him, had decided that the country should adopt democratic mechanisms. It was exciting to see how thrifty the Bhutanese organizers were for ideas about how to do democracy better. For instance, they lapped up voting theorists’ state-of-the-art ideas about how to design voting processes to minimize strategic voting.

Notes


7. The proceedings of this conference were published in Beyond the Poll Box: Report from the Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia Conference, 11-13 October 2005, Thimphu, Bhutan Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2010.