

Surviving Progress: A dim view of humanity

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Currently playing in theatres across Canada, the documentary film *Surviving Progress* has attracted a good deal of media attention and accolades from both the official “left” and the right, if for rather different reasons. This feature-length film is inspired by the best-selling *A Short History of Progress*, itself drawn from the 2004 Massey lectures by Canadian author and historian Ronald Wright.

Surviving Progress continues collaborations developed in previous productions between Harold Crooks, co-director with Mathieu Roy, and executive producer Mark Achbar. Crooks was a co-writer on the well-known documentary *The Corporation* (2003), which Achbar co-directed and co-wrote. Achbar also co-directed *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992).

The new film, which debuted at the 2011 Toronto Film Festival, is largely made up of interviews with experts and celebrities, including scientists, economists, artists, activists and historians—Stephen Hawking, Jane Goodall, Margaret Atwood, Vaclav Smil, Daniel Povinelli, Gary Marcus, Marina Silva and others.

While the film has been praised for its startling photography and imagery, which lend it a certain commercial appeal, the generally positive reception it has received may reflect a wider anxiety regarding the fate of human society, particularly among those who see no viable alternative to the current set-up.

Using a format developed in previous works of this type, an especially unpopular *particular* evil of modern society (corporation malfeasance, the mainstream media, etc.) is singled out and treated in such a manner that the spectator is led to believe that if only this were remedied, the existing order could otherwise be salvaged.

Taking a disapproving look at the very notion of progress, *Surviving Progress* offers the concept of “progress traps” as the explanation for the failure of various civilizations, up to and including our own. The film cites as evidence the early example of Woolly Mammoth hunters who learned they could kill more of their prey by driving them off a cliff, possibly contributing to the animals’ extinction.

Beginning from an underlying assumption that human intelligence may itself be the greatest danger we face, the book and film take us on what amounts to a drive-by shooting of the entire project of civilization. At one point in his book, Wright even says, “The devil lives within us whenever we steal a march on nature.”

Tapping social anxiety

Surviving Progress departs significantly from Wright’s book, which deals principally with examples of ecological devastation arising from “progress traps” that the author argues ended civilizations such as the Sumerian and Mayan, as well as destroying unique societies such as once existed on the Easter Islands.

Co-director Roy acknowledges that the reason the production did not proceed along the lines originally planned was the economic crisis of 2008, which erupted as the crew began filming and obliged the filmmakers to alter their course somewhat.

In view of the social cataclysm unleashed by the economic collapse, and the resulting storm of public anger over the looting of the economy by the rich, *Surviving Progress* includes some harsh words regarding the rule of the market from economists such as Simon Johnson, former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund. “The bankers can’t stop themselves. It’s in their DNA, in the DNA of their organizations, to take massive risks, to pay themselves ridiculous salaries and to collapse.”

Geneticist David Suzuki openly ridicules the notion of contemporary economics as a science, asserting, “Conventional economics is a form of brain damage.”

Taken together, the interviews and commentary imply that the market economy is itself some sort of “progress trap.” This is typical of the sort of blithe conflating of progress in general with the crisis of modern capitalism presented throughout the film.

This brings us to a critical point: the essentially ahistorical and abstract manner in which the filmmakers treat the notion of “progress.”

Scientific socialism established more than 150 years ago the historically progressive role played by capitalism in shattering feudal society. Various geographical discoveries, as well as “the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.

“Modern industry has established the world market. ... This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.” (*The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels)

This economically revolutionary role found expression in the realm of thought, as the finest representatives of the new middle class explored the world and subjected it to reason during the Enlightenment of the 18th century. With utter legitimacy, these figures identified their notions and interests with those of human “progress.”

Having long since exhausted its historically progressive role, a decayed and reactionary ruling elite today identifies “progress” with its unfettered ability to make profits.

The socially and ecologically destructive drive by rival profit interests to extend their dominion over the globe, with the accompanying danger of a cataclysmic world war, demonstrates how the once-progressive bourgeoisie has turned into its opposite: the greatest threat to human progress and even human existence. The makers of *Surviving Progress*, however, make no distinction between one era with its specific set of social relations, and another.

On the contrary, the film’s take on recent economic and political turmoil gives a dangerously false view of the contemporary situation. Insofar as any advice is offered, the filmmakers urge us to conserve our resources and take a skeptical view towards any suggestion that real social progress is either possible or advisable. *Surviving Progress* impotently urges the spectator to work to curb some of the system’s excesses.

Morality traps

Surviving Progress creates false analogies between civilizations of the distant past and present-day society while leaving aside that, which in any meaningful way, defines us as human—and that is our *social* development.

Leon Trotsky offered a more insightful appraisal of the problems of culture and society in the past century when he noted that, “technology is a basic conquest of mankind; although it has indeed served until now as an instrument of exploitation, it is at the same time the basic requirement for the liberation of the exploited.”

As Trotsky observed, “It is the class structure of society which most decisively determines the content and form of human history, i.e., its material relations and their ideological reflections.” For Wright and presumably the filmmakers, things are stood on their head and ideas, or a fixed human nature, are what drive development.

Developing the outlook of his earlier writings that condemn the crimes of colonialism while lionizing primitive cultures, Wright plays to a variety of middle class guilt that selectively highlights unsavory aspects of historical development, and particularly the crimes of the imperialist era, to essentially characterize all social development as equally horrifying.

Explicitly rejecting a Marxist analysis as either “a fundamentalist delusion” or utopian, the film interprets historical development in a thoroughly idealist, and falsely moralizing

fashion.

Overall the view presented expresses a certain disapproval for civilization itself, presented as a general blight on nature. Revealing a thinly veiled misanthropy, the numerous aerial shots of polluted urban sprawl portray humanity as something of an infestation on the planet.

Pseudo-social science

The thesis developed in *Surviving Progress*, adopted from Wright’s book, is a one-sided and morbid view of social development. The film will most appeal to those who already have a dim view of humanity, but this false impression is rooted in the decay of the present social order, which the filmmakers are keen to avoid examining as such, let alone in distinction to any other period.

“We are running 21st-century software on hardware that hadn’t been upgraded in 50,000 years” observes one commentator. This formulation is characteristic of the sort of pop-science adopted by the filmmakers in their assessment of human progress. This is not to deny that the documentary conveys certain valuable insight and criticism. It must be pointed out, however, that while some of those interviewed in the film rank among the greatest scientific minds of our time, this does not necessarily endow them with any special insight as social theorists.

For all its oppositional tone and hand-wringing, the outlook presented in *Surviving Progress* rejects the possibility of humanity effectively determining its own fate. One need not question the deeply felt sympathy for the oppressed, or strident criticism of the market expressed in the film, to argue that the outlook of Wright and company is retrograde, if not outright reactionary. After all, where does it point us?

On balance, we are invited to take part in a collective self-condemnation and even despair, while any deeper understanding of the historic crisis humanity now faces is said to be insoluble on the basis of further social development. Whatever the intention, this leaves quite specific social groups, i.e., the financial and corporate elite, off the hook. If the problem is *everyone’s* fault, then it is effectively *no one’s*.

One might legitimately pose the question: couldn’t the very intellectual capacity that allows Wright and company to make such a supposedly trenchant analysis be used to understand how to overcome these traps—and to organize society on a rational basis?



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