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Book review:

Cristina Neesham, *Human and social progress: projects and perspectives*, VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken, 2008, 220 pages

James Moulder

To understand the world of today, hold it up to the world of long ago.
Kamo-no-Chomei, in Japan, 1155–1216

As we settled into a new millennium, Cristina Neesham completed her doctoral studies at the University of Melbourne with a thesis on human and social progress. Her aim was straightforward and awesome: to rescue Progress from the dungeons of Nihilism, Absolutism and Universalism. By defining Progress as desirable change, she unleashed three powerful questions. What is changing? Human well-being and the social systems which enrich or impoverish it. Who believes the change is desirable? Anyone who believes it will enrich their well-being. What makes it desirable? A constellation of criteria that are sidelined by myopic readings of the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). Respectively, these readings feed technological, economic and political paradigms that impoverish, instead of enriching, human well-being.

The rest of her campaign is credible and incisive. Confidently and expertly, she moves through the ideas of her Big Three - Condorcet, Smith and Marx - demonstrating that in each case an ideal of social progress was subordinated to an ideal of human well-being: subordinated, respectively, to a war against ignorance, against poverty and against alienation. Armed with these insights, she confronts Nihilism, Absolutism and Universalism. Nihilism (insistence on having nothing) and Absolutism (insistence on having everything) are dismissed as kissing cousins: both fail to see that, more often than not, there is something between nothing and everything; that the extremes are contrary rather than contradictory.

But sometimes Absolutism trades as Perfectionism; as the insistence that there is only one perfect (unproblematic) conception of an ideal society and only one perfect (unproblematic) conception of human well-being, both of which are (must be?) attainable. When trading as Perfectionism, Absolutism is the ally of Universalism; the ally of the assumption that all human beings have the same - or nearly the same - basic needs and interests. But both of these positions are obviously false. And so, because myopic readings of the Big Three suggest that they feed versions of a technological, an economic and a political understanding of Progress that impoverishes, instead of enriching, human well-being, it is easy to conclude that these three conceptions of Progress are both false and undesirable.

Neesham savages this alliance between Universalism and Absolutism (disguised as Perfectionism) by reading Condorcet, Smith and Marx comprehensively rather than selectively. In each case, she finds it easy to make two points. Each of these dreamers dreamed a dream in which he created a social system that served human beings, rather than the other way round. And in each one's dream, instead of an emaciated and one-dimensional account of human well-being, we find an enriched and multidimensional conception of what it means to be human. In other words, Condorcet's dream isn't only about overcoming ignorance; it's also about an "unbreakable chain" in which knowledge is linked to virtue, material well-being, liberty and equality. In Smith's dream, overcoming poverty by expanding trade is tied to achieving virtue, liberty and security. In Marx's dream, overcoming alienation includes everyone having sufficient wealth to have free time for creative activities that are the ultimate expressions of human well-being.

If that's the good news from the Big Three, each of them also gives us the same kind of bad news; the bad news that helped Nihilism, Absolutism and Universalism to drag them into ideological bondage. And so, as a first step towards rehabilitating Progress, Neesham identifies the structural weaknesses in the three dreams about desirable dimensions of being human. In each case, the dimensions are arranged in a hierarchy which has one privileged member - knowledge, wealth or participatory democracy - that, allegedly, by itself drives Progress towards an ideal society and an ideal way of being human. The hierarchy has other undesirable features: its members are in an absolute (unique and true) rank order, which is static (unchanging) and universal (one ranking applies everywhere and satisfies everyone). Finally, instead of being presented as expressions of what their creators believe are desirable dimensions of human well-being they are disguised

as empirical findings; as observable facts about human beings and the well-being they desire.

Having diagnosed the disease, Neesham proposes a remedy. There are no privileged dimensions and no single ranking; none of the dimensions are either static or universal; and they feed on healthy normative discussions instead of anemic empirical findings. Instead of being in a pyramid (think Giza), each dimension is in a constellation (think Orion). And, as in a field of forces, each dimension is dynamically related to and conditioned by every other dimension (think Gravity). Better, think Kurt Lewin's (1975) force-field analysis in which the dimensions push each other away from or towards a goal; a goal that counts as progress towards an enriched way of being human. Better still, brood over figure 11 in chapter six: it's Neesham's illuminating representation of her constellation model that replaces the pyramid model that misrepresents the thinking of the Big Three.

So, what's the story about Neesham's story?

The good news is that she's rehabilitated Progress, as well as the three dead white males who served her, but not always in her best interests. The Big Three, because they were children of the modern world, told a story about Progress that has Newtonian overtones. Neesham, being a child of the post-modern world, has given us a fresh version of the story; one that has Quantum overtones of uncertainty (Heisenberg) and complementarity (Bohr). In other words, her constellation model - like post-modern sensibility - is stochastic and under-determined rather than linear and strictly-determined. And so, she has opened the door for people like Danah Zohar - see her 1994 *Quantum Society*- to join the search for societies that nourish human well-being instead of starving it.

As always, there's also bad news. It comes from Plato, David Hume and the Lone Ranger. Each of them has a question which is an unholy mix of conceptual and empirical factors.

Plato's question - which he probably never asked! - is implied by his answer to a question about how to design (create?) an ideal society and ideal human beings: 'They will begin by taking the State and the manners of men, from which, as from a tablet, they will rub out the picture, and leave a clean surface. This is no easy task. But whether easy or not, herein will lie the difference between them and

every other legislator - they will have nothing to do either with individual or State, and will inscribe no laws, until they have either found, or themselves made, a clean surface." (Republic 501a, Jowett's translation, various editions since 1881) In other words, Plato is asking social engineers - like the Big Three - to pay more attention than they usually do to the transition from the old to the new. For example, is it possible for administrators who've been trained in and conditioned by a highly authoritarian system to design or create a highly democratic one?

Although he heard it, Smith ignored Hume's question. It's about the fact that, in at least one respect, ideal societies are like defective ones: they are populated by people who have limited affections for each other and who are competing for scarce resources. If this wasn't so, in an ideal society we wouldn't need any of the institutions of justice: "Why raise landmarks between my neighbour's field and mine, when my heart has made no division between our interests; but shares all his joys and sorrows with the same force and vivacity as if originally my own? For what purpose make a partition of goods, where every one has already more than enough? Why call this object mine, when upon the seizing of it by another, I need but stretch out my hand to possess myself to what is equally valuable?" (An enquiry concerning the principles of morals; first published in 1751; from a 1977 edition, pages 15-16)

Finally, there's the Lone Ranger's question: Is there a causal connection between ideal societies and ideal ways of being human? If there is, which way does the causality run? From a society to human well-being? Or the other way round? If there isn't a causal connection between achieving these two ideals, why bother about trying to design or create an ideal society? Why not go directly to designing or following a prescription for human well-being? For sure, this is the road less travelled, but in Greece Epicurus (341-270) took it; and in Japan he was joined by Kamo-no-Chomei (1155-1216). And, because it depicts five trees on a small island, the cover of Neesham's book may be advocating the Lone Ranger's option!

Neither Plato, nor Hume, nor the Lone Ranger has invalidated Neesham's achievement. On the other hand, their questions bite. And those of us who live in societies that are like America's - or aspiring to be like it - are bleeding from Hume's question more than from the other two. This is the case, because, if Progress includes a concept of fairness, then, according to Edward Wilson's 2002 calculation, in this century, we need to reduce our assets and appetites by 75 percent. And this reduction is required, because every human being can have what

we've got - or hope to have what we've got - only if the earth were four times bigger than it is. In other, less kindly, words: we've been greedy and taken much more than a fair share of the earth's resources. But, faced by questions like Hume's, we need not despair because we can't dream the dreams of the Big Three. Instead, we can join Neesham in dreaming a more credible dream than any of theirs.

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