Progress in the distribution of power: gender relations and women's movements as a source of change

Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Brown University
Marilyn Rueschemeyer

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Rethinking Progress

MOVEMENTS, FORCES, AND IDEAS
AT THE END OF THE
20th CENTURY

Edited by

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER
and
PIOTR SZTOMPKA

Boston
UNWIN HYMAN
London Sydney Wellington
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DIETRICH and MARILYN RUESCHEMeyer

The idea of progress and the problem of this essay

Twentieth-century history – as well as twentieth-century social theory – makes it dubious to try to "read off" positive goal states from the actual record of history. There is little reason to look for long-term developments that led to a better or even an acceptable world with any inherent necessity. At the same time, there is reason to view the historical process as less determined by unchangeable factors and therefore as less predictable than much of nineteenth-century social theory held it to be.

That means that a reasonable discourse about progress may contain again a strong normative component, setting out goal states that are desirable on value principles. At the same time, such discourse about progress should not be utopian in a literal sense of the word: its designs have to be based on arguments about realistic historical possibilities, they have to show that the normative premises are also likely to be accepted as valid in the anticipated future, and they have to identify forces that have a chance of bringing the identified goal state closer to realization.¹

This is a chapter advocating as well as anticipating progress in the distribution of power. Normatively we claim that less power inequality and more democratic participation are major features of a desirable future. Predictively we claim that changing gender relations will continue to transform all industrial societies and that these processes of eroding male domination and privilege have a good chance of contributing substantially to an extension and a deepening of democracy. This contribution to further democratization is more likely under some contingent conditions and parallel developments than under others.

Progress in democracy: what is desirable, what is possible?

"... Democracy is not only or even primarily a means through which different groups can attain their ends or seek the good society; it is the good society." This proposition of Seymour Martin Lipset (1963: 439) will appeal to many, but it will mean quite different things to those who agree. And there are others who disagree: at the one end of a continuum of opinion, because they see democracy as an instrument of human freedom that may or may not perform well and that must be rejected if it infringes on individual liberty (e.g., Hayek); at the other end of that spectrum, because it is doubted that democracy can ever approximate in substance what it promises in form – a determination of collective decisions in which all participate as equals – and because it is argued that democracy will inevitably be just a deceptive device protecting objectionable concentrations of private power (the classic Marxist position).

The contrast roughly indicated by these two positions – dividing also the conceptions of democracy embraced without reservation as an end in itself – has a long history in democratic theory (Locke, Madison, Bentham, J. St. Mill, Rousseau, Marx). Radical proposals for democratic participation and political equality were countered by arguments for stable and efficient government, and a primary concern for protecting individual liberty against state intrusion, whether democratic or not. In the twentieth century, empirical democratic theory – initiated by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter and developed in American political science and political sociology after the Second World War – gave strong support to the position that rather modest forms of democracy (protecting individual liberties quite...
effectively, however) were all one could hope for. This was, in fact, the conception of democracy Lipset had in mind when he wrote the words just quoted.

This position of modest skepticism, which supported its prescriptive implications with the authority of empirical social science, accepted a number of features of "really existing democracies" as inevitable in complex industrial societies. A simplified model of this conception can be stated as follows: rather narrow political elites make a few "oligopolistic" offers on the political market among which the many choose in periodic elections. Lack of participation must not be viewed with too much alarm – it serves stability, and for most people politics is not very important anyway. Substantial socioeconomic inequality and its impact on political decision-making are facts of life that must be accepted (aside from marginal change) lest one invites tyranny. If this political order does not come very close to equality in collective decision-making, it does protect rather efficiently individual civil liberties.

This position drew additional support from the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism. The denaturation of socialism under Lenin and Stalin discredited more radically egalitarian democratic ideals in the eyes of many. And Nazi as well as Salinist rule made individual liberties far more precious than they had ever been before.

Yet the consensus around the position of modest skeptics was shattered in the late 1960s. If the early iconoclasts – like Marcuse, Goodman, or Zinn – were not exactly a match for empirical democratic theorists in rational argument and responsiveness to empirical fact, they did expose the normative component of "empirical" democratic theory. And they were followed by others (including, one might note, a partial convert like Robert Dahl (1956, 1971, 1985, 1989), in addition to C. B. Macpherson (1973, 1977), Carole Pateman (1970, 1983), or Nicos Poulantzas (1980)) – others who made far more sophisticated and complex arguments about the possibilities of advances in democratization. The question of the quality of democracy in the future has been reopened.

What are the chances of a deepening of democratization, of participatory democracy? We can here only give the briefest sketch of our position, but a few basic points must be made in order to give some substance to our conception of a desirable, as well as possible future.

Radical democracy – in the sense of a roughly equal influence on collective decision-making through the participation of all – is impossible in societies of any complexity. Social and political theorists (not exactly rich in propositions that are both powerful and commonly accepted) virtually agree on a number of propositions that spell out the obstacles. Since they are well known, a few reminders will suffice. The most important theorems concern the exclusionary role of expertise and systematic administration, the difficulty of the many to come to collective goals and co-ordinated collective action, the oligarchic tendencies that emerge once collective organization is achieved, the likelihood that oligarchic elites of weaker groups are co-opted by the agents of more resourceful and powerful ones, and finally the fact that many people have little interest in a participation that shapes in a more or less infinitesimal way larger collective decisions (even if these decisions affect the structural conditions of their lives).

It is of course these propositions that underlie the position of skepticism regarding more than very modest progress toward more democratic forms of social and political life. Yet such a conclusion overlooks the considerable variability of the phenomena invoked. State and other administrative machineries do not all have the same degree of autonomy. The relations between experts and citizens are by no means uniform, varying for instance with the level of general education and with political splits among the experts. Even very large and socially weak groups did achieve collective organization. Not all organizations have stable oligarchies. There is great variation in patterns of co-optation. And the interest in participation in public life also varies with resources, chances of success, and the urgency of need. In short, all of the problematic outcomes are variable and contingent outcomes, contingent on conditions as yet only partially understood.

The different outcomes seem interdependent. Thus low levels of public participation correlate more or less closely with a lesser sense of efficacy as well as with lower socioeconomic status and in particular with low levels of education. Greater participation could make democracy more "real" in a number of ways. First, it could reduce oligarchic tendencies at least at the base of interest organizations and parties. Second, an increased capacity and willingness to shape one's own life through active participation would transform authority relations in a variety of institutions and social contexts – especially in family and neighborhood and at work, but also in schools, in various voluntary associations, and in religious organizations. Success in participating in these different social arenas would reinforce participation in politics and vice versa. Third, successful participation entails the learning of social and political skills as well as the acquisition of a lay capacity to judge the advice and the work of experts. This has powerful potential consequences for an increased control of administrators and experts in interest organizations, parties, and state institutions.

Such changes may not usher in the good society in any comprehensive sense. But they would constitute progress, however partial and incomplete. This for three reasons. First, a spreading commitment to active participation beyond the sphere of immediate self-interest would improve the quality of public life. Since it would create new "habits of the heart" (Bellah et al. 1985), it would make possible common undertakings that now
all too easily fall victim to the pervasive appeal of “free riding.” Second, active participation in matters that concern one’s own life is a value in itself and thus a basis of self-respect. The changes in question would make such participation more meaningful and effective at the grass roots level but also, if to a lesser extent, at more distant levels of collective decision making. Third (and only third), such changes would increase (if only somewhat increase) the chances of the many to pursue their interests effectively with political means.

From where should the impulse for such increased participation come? Why should we expect that under certain conditions participation will make more sense, thus become more widespread, and then engender at least some of the democratizing consequences indicated? It is possible but unlikely that those in power have reason to promote an expansion of effective participation. Gorbachev’s policies illustrate the underlying mechanism: a minimum of autonomous participation is necessary in order to maintain the efficient management of even a highly centralized political economy. Still, beyond rather circumscribed limits, those in power will hardly contribute to real advances in democratization.

One might plausibly hypothesize that the vast expansion of leisure time in industrial societies over the last two generations would generate a greater readiness for active participation in public life. But whatever the potential of more free time as a supporting condition, it has not as yet been associated with notable developments towards democratization. Graeme Duncan (1983: 202) seems right when he notes that “the rivers which feed contemporary liberationist thought, which challenges deeply entrenched interests and practices, appear to flow less towards a fuller democracy than towards a hedonistic utopia of leisure and indulgence.”

Responses to the threats of technological advance – the peace movements and the ecology movements – have a better claim to having contributed to active democratic participation and to innovations in the form of democracy. At present it is hard to judge whether these movements are born of temporary fear, destined to decline when their themes are absorbed into regular political channels, or whether technological developments will persistently run ahead of the steering capacity of regular governmental institutions and thus continue to foster such movements.

It is our claim in this chapter that the drawn-out process in which gender relations are being transformed in the direction of equality constitutes a quite likely source of substantial advances toward participatory democracy (in the sense sketched above). We turn first to a brief characterization of the basic causes underlying the slow advance toward gender equality.

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Gender equality: underlying factors and long-term chances

However one wants to date the beginning of the process of women’s emancipation, it has been in motion for a good deal more than a century. And it is far from having spent its force. It has been – and it is likely to be – accompanied by feminist movements; though these push the process forward, they are at the same time symptoms of the underlying forces eroding gender inequality. These underlying factors are of lasting importance and they make for a secular trend of change that may be slowed, interrupted, and even temporarily reversed, but that in the long run is likely to continue ineluctably until a rough equality (or at least a much lower level of inequality) between men and women is reached.

It is possible to imagine different outcomes of this process, but past work on differentiation and inequality suggests that a rough equality has stable structural foundations only if the gender division of labor is radically reduced. This means that women’s emancipation points to a social order fundamentally different from all known social orders. It not only entails radical changes in the positions of women and men. It also means that the most central institutions of the social order have to be reshaped – the institutions of government and religion and, above all, the institutions of family and work, the two arenas in which people spend most of their everyday life. In its most elementary aspect, radically reducing the gender division of labor means that men and women will have a roughly equal involvement in family affairs and domestic work and in occupational work outside the house.

The secular process of eroding gender inequality rests on a number of underlying developments that – for the first time in human history – may come close to eliminating the basic structural causes of male domination and an unequal gender division of labor. We list in particular five such factors:

1. The decline in the number of pregnancies and desired children frees women for other life tasks.
2. The role of family and kinship – and therefore of gender relations – as a construction module in social organization of every kind has been radically reduced in modern industrial societies and replaced by relations based on voluntary agreement and legal guarantees.
3. Changes in the nature of work have reduced or eliminated the premium on overwhelming body strength and on the use of violence, the dimensions in which men – on average – have an advantage over women.
4. Cultural changes in the west (individualism, liberalism, egalitarianism) have made ascriptive disadvantages of any kind profoundly problematic. These ideas have spread successfully into other cultures...
and activate everywhere the readiness of the disadvantaged to embrace the promise of equality.  

(5) Increases in productivity in the industrially advanced countries lift the standard of living—indeed for all—beyond the minimum for survival. This can compensate for—temporarily or permanently—productivity losses should the reduction (and ultimately, the virtual elimination) of the division of labor by gender entail such disadvantages.

The elimination of male domination and privilege encounters very powerful obstacles. This is, first, a correlate of the fact that no previous society has existed without a gender division of labor as a major structural feature. The absence of any historical precedent for social life without a gender division of labor makes experimentation necessary, and much of that experimentation is likely to be unsuccessful. Furthermore, deeply seated and change-resistant ideas and values surrounding gender roles (as well as the sheer contrast of gender roles independent of content) are shared by both women and men. They profoundly shape personality formation, the legitimation of established institutions, and even the paths of behavioral and institutional innovation.

Finally there are, last but not least, powerful vested interests defending the status quo, in particular the very strong interests in reproducing positions of domination and regulating access to them. These exist in the family, in work organizations, in associational life, in religion, and in political and state systems of rule. Even where these vested interests are not directly and consciously antagonistic to new chances for women, they often in effect turn antagonistic because rearrangements favoring women disrupt the established order and may at least temporarily interfere with established institutional goals—be they economic, social, political, or religious.

These adverse conditions explain why social change toward gender equality is such a slow and protracted process. In fact, in advanced capitalist economies recent progress in reducing the gender division of waged labor, in improving the relative earning power of women, and in engaging men in household and family activities is so limited that some observers will dismiss our anticipations about the future as hollow optimism.

It is of course true that one can stipulate assumptions about the relative weight and the interaction of different strands of social change that lead to conclusions contrary at least to the strong version of our proposition—that in the long run gender division of labor will virtually disappear and gender equality will be closely approximated. In particular, it seems possible that important elements of gender difference will remain salient features of social life and that such differences in gender roles will be affirmed by both men and women even if that retention of gender difference lends some support to old forms of gender inequality and interfere with egalitarian developments. However, we submit that current levels of gender inequality will be very hard to stabilize in the long run and, furthermore, that compromises between demands for equality and an appreciation of gender difference will be stable only after profound change in the character of gender roles and in the level of inequality.

Women’s participation in public life and progress in democracy

Has woman the same rights in the state which man has? This question may appear ridiculous to many. For if the only ground of all legal rights is reason and freedom, how can a distinction exist between two sexes which possess both the same reason and the same freedom? Nevertheless, it seems that, so long as men have lived, this has been differently held, and the female sex seems not to have been placed on a par with the male sex in the exercise of its rights. Such a universal sentiment must have a ground, to discover which was never a more urgent problem than in our days (quoted in Pateman 1983).

Carole Pateman considers these words of J. G. Fichte typical of the prevailing approach to the position of women since “the time, three hundred years ago, when the individualist social contract theorists launched the first critical attack on patriarchalism” (ibid.: 206). Clearly this is not the case any more. The principle of equal rights is generally accepted except in the most traditional countries. Yet this is a recent development.

Voting rights stood at the center of the early women’s movement. Only in the twentieth century (in Switzerland as late as 1970), did women nearly everywhere gain suffrage rights equal to men. But the formal right to participate stands in stark contrast to continued underrepresentation of women in positions of political power. Less than 10 percent of the members of national parliaments in the United Kingdom and the United States are women, while in Sweden, one of the most progressive countries for women’s issues, the proportion is a little more than a quarter. Generally, the proportion of women is—in the east and the west—lower the higher one moves up in the hierarchies of state and politics.

The causes of this state of affairs are largely found in the gender division of labor outside of politics, though sex discrimination in the political sphere also plays a role. First, the central life activities of many women are still confined to family and domestic work. This often has disabling consequences for their interest in politics as well as for the development of skills that make political participation effective. Since the Second World War, however, we can observe in all advanced countries a steady increase in the labor force participation of women as well as in their level of education.
Second, many women who do work outside the house find themselves carrying most of the burden of housework as well. This not only limits their career commitment, but also makes it very unlikely that they will actively engage in politics. The dual burden of job and housework is not merely the result of cultural lag, though that is a factor, too (M. Rueschemeyer 1981). A thorough-going change requires – in addition to adequate childcare facilities and similar public aid – that men get equally involved in domestic work and family affairs. This would be a major change in gender roles. It would not only involve a transformation of life plans and gender identities, but it also requires radical changes in the employment systems of economy and state.

An alternative to an equal sharing of occupational and familial responsibilities is the delayed entry into one’s career – usually the woman’s career. That entails substantial disadvantages in later advancement and in the possible conversion of occupational experience and success into political assets.

Partly due to these conditions rooted in the linkage between family and work and partly due to the strong reproduction tendencies of occupational and economic power structures, women end up more often in less powerful occupational positions than men. The same holds for those positions that have more or less close links to politics and therefore in a particular way make political participation easier – such as positions in unions as well as civic, religious, and other voluntary associations.

These problems must not only be seen as individual issues. They acquire their greatest significance on the aggregate political level. There is little doubt that women will not attain a substantial share of political power unless they gain a substantial share of economic power.

It is conceivable – especially if one focuses only on individual life plans and decisions – that women’s emancipation could leave politics virtually untouched and primarily play itself out in the arenas of work and family. That is, however, extremely unlikely, because in all modern societies the state has become a – if not the – main agent of deliberate social change. Persistent politicization of women’s issues is likely precisely because the emancipation process encounters so many obstacles. The repetitive and manifestly structural character of individual difficulties systematically converts private problems into public, political issues. Therefore, while women’s movements in different countries and time periods may run different courses and take on different political colorations, they will not turn away from politics. And in continuous political systems they are likely to crystallize stable political orientations that are progressive in terms of women’s causes.  

How will all this advance the cause of democratization? To begin with the most elementary target of transformation, approaching real equality in the gender roles in marriage and the family must, in itself, be considered an advance of democracy broadly conceived.

Women’s participation and the quality of politics

Will increased participation of women make a difference in politics? Once the 40 percent women’s quota for all offices in the German Social democratic party is voted in, argued Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, one of...
the woman leaders of the SPD, "it won't be the same party, comrades. You will notice that." The style of work and interaction would change, and the "endless speeches of some men" would soon be a thing of the past, once a certain number of women is involved (Der Spiegel, June 20, 1988: 40).

There is likely to be more than a change in style. This prediction is quite safe for the protracted periods of transition. One can show now that women have political concerns that are distinctive from those of men. They center around problems with which at the moment women are more concerned than men - school and children's problems, drugs, and the friction points between work and family obligations - as well as around such issues as peace and environmental concerns (Lee 1976, Skard 1983). That women's current concerns - held distinctively now even under the hegemony of male politics - would gain more prominence with greater political participation of women is very likely indeed. It is the substantive reason why one must judge the sheer fact of an increased participation of women significant progress in democratization.

Whether there will be differences in the nature of politics in the long-term future that can be attributed to the fuller participation of women is a far more speculative question. It may well be that women have universally a lesser inclination toward violence and aggression than men (Sanday 1981). A plausible explanation of this phenomenon - assuming it were well established - could be derived from women's universal role in the nurturance of children. We are inclined to adopt this position.

On these assumptions what would be the consequence of new patterns in which women and men equally share familial and domestic tasks as well as occupational work? The conservative answer invokes the potential losses that may derive from the changes in the (middle-class) roles of housewife and mother. It would make good theoretical sense to expect on the contrary that the roles and orientations of men would be far more significantly transformed through the adoption of nurturing responsibilities. This could have subtle but far-reaching consequences for the treatment of conflict and the display of aggression in politics.

However, it seems wise to break our speculations off at this point. To anticipate with any plausibility changes in the quality of political life due to changed gender relations and increased participation of women is far more hazardous than to develop reasonable scenarios for a reduction in gender inequality, increased political participation of women, and a deepening of the democratic character of political life.

**Modifying conditions and parallel developments**

The consideration of other developments and of their impact on the process of woman's emancipation and its potential/likely democratizing consequences opens an impossibly wide field of questions and problems. That means, among other things, that all of the above must not be understood as a prediction of the future, which inevitably would require the determination of all significant interaction effects as well as a prediction of all the possible modifying developments and their contingent conditions. Our argument rather must be understood as the explication of one plausible strand of future developments.

Yet interactions with various other developments that have in turn their own contingent conditions are of special interest for the particular approach we have taken, because we might find here especially clear illustrations of opportunities for historical choice.

A rather simple example concerns the increase in leisure time. Only two or three generations ago, a limited work-day and secure vacations were an upper-class privilege. The tremendous increase in free time clearly could aid the developments envisioned. It eases the transformation of gender roles as well as greater political participation if other conditions foster such developments. Yet this positive contribution is radically curtailed by present trends in the west, where the most qualified professions experience very little release from work and its time pressures while the least qualified 10 to 20 percent are periodically forced into unemployment. Any policy measures that would equalize somewhat the burdens and the attractions and rewards of work would also make a positive contribution to women's emancipation because they would improve the conditions for the transformation of gender roles.

Much more complicated issues are raised by environmental concerns and the call for steady-state economies. Among many other requirements, the latter goal would presuppose a transformation of the systems of inequality, because continuous growth serves at present as one of the major mechanisms preserving social peace (it is easier to lose in comparison to others when one still gains in absolute terms). Reduced social inequality and a no-growth economy may be very desirable, but they are perhaps even more difficult to approximate than the transformation of gender relations and the attendant deepening of democracy sketched earlier. Still, it may be worth pointing out that these different goal states would not only be quite compatible with each other, but actually increase each other's chances of realization - a quite remarkable constellation, since so often different desirable goal states are at odds with each other so that their realization involves difficult choices. 12

**Conclusion: changing gender relations and democratization**

Our argument can be restated in a nutshell. We anticipate as a plausible and desirable long-term development that open political systems will
experience a deepening of democracy that is due to changes in gender relations and the activities of feminist movements. Modern societies lack the structural foundations of gender inequality that have characterized all previous forms of social life. At the same time, change in gender relations encounters powerful obstacles. It is this tension that has repeatedly given rise to women’s movements, and it will continue to do so in the future. Any success in transforming gender relations in the family and at work can be considered a deepening of democracy in the broad conception of that term. Such advances would also enable women to participate more frequently and more effectively in various interest associations and parties as well as in political decision making proper. While this influx of new participants and interests may make the working of political organizations more responsive and less oligarchic, the very attainment of a rough equality in political participation between men and women must be considered a major advance in democratization.

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Notes

1. There are other problems involved in such discourse about progress that will not be treated here. We may mention just one complex of issues. Long-term change is not very likely to result from the intentional action of some organized groups. Even where it is substantially affected by intentional collective action, the outcome may not be intended by any one collective actor. Unintended consequences are much more likely. What, then, is the role of normative discourse about the future? In the best of circumstances it may – in conjunction with empirically oriented theories and anticipations – somewhat improve some of the intentional actions. More important, it may help shape value orientations that transcend narrow sets of collective actors as well as short historical time spans. Nevertheless, these considerations suggest that the value of theorizing about progress may be quite limited even with a rehabilitation of normative designs. Our position sketched in the text is based on Rueschemeyer (1986) as well as Giddens (1981, 1985).

2. Marilyn Rueschemeyer’s work on marriage, work and community participation in the German Democratic Republic (Rueschemeyer 1981, 1982, 1988) was especially important even though East German political life does not come close to our conception of democracy. Dietrich Rueschemeyer is working with Evelyne and John Stephens on a comparative analysis of the conditions of democracy (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens forthcoming).


4. Education has a number of relevant effects. It may not only increase one’s status, earning power, and influence but also widen horizons beyond the realm of personal interaction and enlighten about the structural conditions of one’s more immediate experience.

5. For discussions of the complex interrelations of participation, grass roots influence, and central control in the more circumscribed arenas of workplace and residential area in a state socialist society see M. Rueschemeyer (1982, 1988).

6. We acknowledge that there is disagreement on what constitutes gender equality and consequently on whether gender equality existed in any earlier circumstances (see, e.g., Rosaldo 1974 and Sanday 1981). The discussion of the causes of male domination and the gender division of labor has been conducted primarily by anthropologists. While it is in a narrowly specific sense inconclusive, there is a convergence on a range of relevant factors. For overviews and substantive contributions see Rosaldo (1974), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), Hartmann (1976), Sanday (1981). Hartmann (1976) and Boeserup (1970) offer important historical analyses of the impact of capitalist industrialization in England and economic development in Third World countries, respectively.

7. Here, in the importance of family and the exchange of women for the construction of society, lies for C. Lévi-Strauss the point of origin for the gender division of labor and male domination.

8. Sanday (1981), turning away from an earlier materialist position, emphasizes the ideological foundations of a culture as a condition for modifying the impact of other factors shaping gender relations. While there is little doubt that patriarchal traits dominate in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, this tradition has drawn its vitality from the fact that it was able to embrace and accommodate also the opposites of its main themes and to shift the weight given to certain values with changing conditions. The values of European modernity have deep roots in this tradition, but also represent a major redefinition of Judaeo-Christian culture – so much so that some would prefer to think of them as post-Christian.

9. Karen Offen (1988) has argued persuasively for the strength of what she calls “relational” in contrast to “individualist” feminism in the continental European women’s movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She also argues that relational feminism, which accepts greater gender difference and emphasizes familial and other social responsibilities, would appeal to many women who today take their distance from current, more strongly “individualist” forms of feminism.

10. See, e.g., Epstein and Coser (1980), Lee (1976), Meyer (1986), Skard (1983), and Stacey and Price (1981). Lee (1976) reports one very revealing study in Westchester County, New York, on “why few women hold public office.” Beckwith (1986) found in the United States few differences between men and women in voting and other non-elite forms of political participation; but women showed a consistently lower sense of political efficacy. Useful reviews of how women’s participation is treated in political studies are given by Evans (1980), Goot and Reynolds (1975), and Wally (1986).

11. The politics of women’s issues took a very different course in the industrialized west and the state socialist east. In Eastern Europe state policy strongly encouraged women’s participation in the labor force and developed a series of important support measures including a system of childcare, a paid
baby year with guaranteed return to one’s job and other measures. This has led especially in the younger generation to far reaching changes in gender relations. At the same time, women’s movements are tiny if they exist at all, and the official women’s organizations are weaker than other mass organizations. The industrialized west has seen since the late 1960s a resurgence of women’s movement. It was this development that has succeeded in securing a series of favorable political and judicial decisions, and it probably accelerated the increase in the labor force participation of women. The public policy measures supporting women are, however, considerably weaker than those in Eastern Europe. This difference between a state-induced development and one in which the yeast of a grass-roots movement (if largely a middle and upper middle-class movement) played a central role, raises interesting comparative questions about fundamental aspects of the long-term emancipation process.

12. This compatibility is not accidental. Reduced social inequality is a common feature of the goal states of environmentalism, women’s emancipation, and participatory democracy. C. B. Macpherson (1977) argues that a transformation of politics towards participatory democracy (which he defines in more demanding terms than we did) depends on two prerequisites. “One is a change in people’s consciousness (or unconsciousness), from seeing themselves and acting as essentially consumers to seeing themselves and acting as exerters and enjoyers of the exertion and development of their own capacities.” “The other prerequisite is a great reduction of the present social and economic inequality, since that inequality, as I have argued, requires a non-participatory party system to hold society together” (Macpherson, 1977: 99, 100).

Bibliography

The end of western trade unionism?: social progress after the age of progressivism

DAVID KETTLER and VOLKER MEJA

Contemporary sociological theory, like contemporary politics, is marked by the somewhat paradoxical conviction that progressivism is out of date. Social change cannot be denied as a reality, but its coherent, cumulative, developmental character is frequently called into doubt. No cause, moreover, can plausibly justify itself today simply by claiming to be “in the line of social development.” The paradox involved in social or political analyses which conclude, in effect, that it is no longer progressive to be progressive points to a needless confusion. First, then, it is perfectly possible and often valuable to retain an analytical concept of social progress in order to maintain critical contact with the sophisticated tradition of social theory that emphasizes the importance of irreversible experiential learning in the development of vital congeries of social relations over time (Luhmann 1981, 1984). This conception need not assume that all social phenomena can be referred to as social progress or that disruptions and radical discontinuities cannot occur, because it need not imply that social progress is the only subject matter for social theory. And it certainly does not commit the analyst to a normative progressivism, the second context in which progress is a key term. The abandonment of progress as a criterion for evaluating social achievements and projects does not, however, imply the rejection of everything done earlier and justified in the name of progress, but only their reanalysis and reassessment. Because political life does not necessarily benefit from nominalist clean sweeps, it may even be justifiable to continue referring to such achievements and projects as “progressive,” so long as it is made unmistakably clear that the progress here intended is a project, political in the broad sense, and not a process in the sense of the analytical concept.1

This essay is about trade unions, an institution that arose to play an important part in relation to the social progress characterizing much of the present century and that served as an important reference point for several