

Disclaimer:

The following is a class assignment, the final paper for “Foundations and Theories in Interdisciplinary Humanities”. It is a balance between fitting the needs of the class such as being a certain length, and having a sufficient number of scholarly references with trying to find as many strong talking points to the Colorado Emerging Managers committee to address the idea that “progress happens naturally, so why do we need to go out of our way”? This should not be mistaken for a fully vetted scholarly article in an official journal, but instead as research done over the span of a few months with limitations in both time and resources.

With this understanding in mind this paper I believe does provide several talking points to the matter above. This can hopefully help as a starting point for emerging managers and others in our field running into similar problems that can be expanded and improved upon. Whether the points asserted in this paper are enough to push through any initial resistance or hesitation of local government administrators to take a more proactive role in social justice, or if more is needed, will have to be tested.

A Critique of Spectator Progress in Local Government

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The Colorado Emerging Managers is a subcommittee of the Colorado City and County Management Association, an organization that offers networking and other professional trainings and opportunities for local government administrators. The Emerging Managers specifically focuses on new and upcoming leaders. Comprised typically of professionals with titles such as Analyst or Assistant to the Manager, it's expected that many of its members will become the top executives of government organizations as their career progresses.

This paper seeks to address one challenge the Emerging Managers are facing. Due to generational and societal changes, a greater emphasis is being placed on topics such as social justice, equity, inclusion, and others. There's a growing interest to work towards promoting diversity within local government organizations and their communities in addition to other important skills such as management, finance, land use, capital improvements, and others associated with local government administration. However, one argument against taking this extra initiative is that the progress is already happening with or without local governments taking an active part. The United States has historically made great progress from its foundation to the present day, and public opinion appears poised to push greater diversity still. Progress is a natural phenomenon according to this viewpoint, therefore any superfluous efforts seem unnecessary or at least not a compelling priority.

I argue in this paper that progress is not a natural occurrence, and that promoting a more just local government institution and society as a whole is accomplished through dedicated, intentional action. This paper begins by exploring some of the roots of the idea of "natural progress", breaking it down to its component parts. Afterwards, the paper explores theories and concrete examples of the intentionality of progress.

Origins of Spectator Progress

The term "spectator progress" is used as a placeholder as there is no recognized, commonly understood terminology to describe the idea that progress, or the betterment of individuals and society, happens naturally, is somehow predetermined to happen. It is a mainstream belief, one that is taken for granted, and thus is often overlooked.

"That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of [Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."
(Declaration of Independence)

Sweeping language that suggests that people may take action and better their lives "whenever" government becomes a problem is embedded in the early history of the United States. When taken on its own one might think such revolutions are a given, though put in context it took the Revolutionary War to become a reality. One root of the idea of natural progress comes from this disconnect between the words that define American political beliefs and the actions it took to implement them.

Of course, the concept of natural progress often comes with certain conditions. If A (and B and C) criteria are met, then progress is achieved. This can be a vague concept of hard work. "Two traits in particular mark Meg and Robin's idealized Americanness: a strong work ethic and the ability to earn and manage money" (Henderson 110). In her description of American children's literature, Christina Henderson points out a shift to where children can reach their

dreams, albeit in different ways than traditional social hierarchies. It can also stem from some sort of virtue or moral position.

“In a well-ordered state, divine inscrutable power flows from God the Father. In the family, the father occupies this position as the font of rightful authority. This vision does not imply that women cannot occupy powerful positions in the work force. They can as long as they remain tethered to the male source of all authority” (Viefhues-Bailey 197).

In Viefhues-Bailey’s description of Evangelical gendered beliefs, once more some sort of attainment of progress, betterment, improvement can be found if certain beliefs, if a particular status quo is adhered to. From history, to religion, to children’s stories, we are bombarded with variations of the same core idea that we either as individual or as a collective society will reach our aspirations, will do better than generations before. Local government is no exception.

“...when a legislature passes a law and an executive signs it, the law does not implement itself.... Faithful execution of these laws is the highest calling of public administrators. It is the core of administrative responsibility (Kettle 56). Public Administrators as a profession in the U.S. stemmed from a time of automation, objectivity, and consistency. We as public administrators are told our “high calling” is to act without question what we are presented. There is merit and logic to this, a certain flow where people elect politicians, who in turn make decisions, who in turn task administrators with carrying out said decisions. What is assumed is that administrators have a limited role in any sort of social justice or progress, that it will be given to them by a legislature and/or executive first. We are told to wait.

A Dissection of Spectator Progress

As mentioned, “Spectator Progress” as a term is used as a tool in this paper to put a definition to an otherwise amorphous concept. It stems from two of the major components that it is made from. The first is it is decidedly a perspective from a bystander, one who is not taking an active part in progress. The more a person gets involved in efforts of equity and inclusion, sees not only success but failure, who witnesses not only improvements, but regression, finds more difficulty in finding a better world natural as opposed to earned. Therefore, it is a belief that is most easily adopted by spectators, who live their lives unchanged and see progress emerge from the actions of others.

Despite the criticism this paper offers against natural progress, “progress” is a necessary aspect of this theory as well. This is distinct from the belief that we need to go back to the way things were, whatever ways that may be. It is still forward-thinking in its own way in the belief that changes will come, and those changes will be good. *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized gay marriage in the United States serves as an example. One notable line from the landmark case is, “The right to marry is fundamental as a matter of history and tradition, but rights come not from ancient sources alone. They rise, too, from a better informed understanding of how constitutional imperatives define a liberty that remains urgent in our own era.” This rationale tries to bridge the past and present, to give deference to the past, while alluding to a natural “rise” in awareness that almost is reminiscent of flowers springing from the earth. The truth is the actual societal awareness came from much more than a simple natural awakening, but decades of sacrifice and efforts across all aspects of society. It is important to recognize though that even with spectator progress, more diversity and acceptance are still at minimum permissible, if not favored. Despite the attribution of societal awareness to a natural growth of society, the majority decision sided with equality.

Spectator progress appears to be a modernist belief. Modernism is defined by objectivity, seeks absolute truths, ignores or undervalues exceptions. Women used to be unable to vote, now they can, therefore progress has been achieved. African Americans were slaves, then were subjected to Jim Crow Laws, and now don't, therefore progress is found. That there are still problems, that there is more nuance and enduring legacies does not diminish the believer in spectator progress's position.

At the heart of spectator progress though is its attempt to reconcile two competing pillars, two different beliefs. The first is of American Exceptionalism. "The phrase 'American exceptionalism' was coined by Stalin, however, the key term 'exceptional' referring to the United States dates back in history to Alexis de Tocqueville who described the American people as being different from the European one – an exceptional people with exceptionally enlightened social ideas" (Pirnuta 121). It is a common belief that there is something that sets the United States apart, or at the very least that there is something profound and praiseworthy of the nation.

The second pillar is the acceptance of America's wrongs. Typical examples include slavery, the genocide of Native American peoples, and women being treated as the property of men. More examples include the Japanese interment camps during World War II, questionable military and espionage acts in other countries, and numerous anti-immigrant efforts. The list could continue, but the point is that the United States of America has committed acts that are morally reprehensible and historically unjustifiable.

Spectator progress allows us to accept both pillars by placing the exceptionalism not in any one time period, including the present, but as a continuing process and experiment. In this way, spectator progress accepts that many of the Founding Fathers were slave owners, but over time the nation they started no longer had slaves, therefore they can still be lauded as part of a slave-free America by proximity.

It is a theory that is flexible, built on compromise with a more practical patriotism. It is a belief well-suited for local government administrators, part of institutions that very likely have their own checkered histories as towns, cities, and counties have reflected the past sins of the nation as a whole. However, its convenience should not be mistaken for effectiveness, and the remainder of this paper will discuss numerous criticisms of this approach.

Defining Progress

The first set of critiques focuses on the term "progress". So far it's been established only loosely, a general idea of traditionally disenfranchised groups having more opportunities and/or fewer obstacles than before. There are different understandings of what progress is and what progress can be, and not all of these understandings fit within the theory of spectator progress.

"[The] results [of a study] suggest that White Americans tend to spontaneously think about racial progress as a movement away from racial injustices of the past instead of thinking of progress as a movement toward a system of full racial equality. In contrast, ethnic minorities seem to spontaneously think about racial progress as a movement toward fully racial equality, and their assessments of progress accordingly take into account the distance we have yet to traverse to reach that goal" (Eibach, Ehrlinger 76).

In researching different perspectives on racial equality, Eibach and Ehrlinger discovered different "reference points". Spectator progress is most decidedly based in what the study found in White Americans, the tendency to view progress from the past. Spectator progress doesn't

account for using a better future as a reference point as that would emphasize current inequities that need to be solved, need to be worked on.

“Mexican Americans display impressive growth in educational attainment between the 1st generation (9.5 years) and the 2nd generation (12.7 years), but no further improvement is evident for the 3rd+ generation (the grandchildren and later descendants of Mexican immigrants)” (Duncan, Grogger, Leon, Trejo 1).

In a study measuring over a decade of the educational attainment of Mexican American immigrants and their descendants, it was discovered that the progress for subsequent generations was not lasting. Once more spectator progress does not account for times when progress is not occurring. Yes, progress was made from that first, initial generation, but then it effectively stopped. Believing that each generation must on average do better in the long run is not necessarily accurate.

Progress itself is a term that continues to evolve and grow as we reach a deeper, more nuanced perspective of our society. “[T]he problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” (Crenshaw 1242). Kimberle Crenshaw, did not come up with the initial idea of intersectionality, but she did coin the term in 1989, not all too long ago. The idea that our experiences, and with them challenges and prejudice, happen in overlapping, interconnected ways is still not fully analyzed and explored.

Seeing progress as natural does not equate that the progress we’re seeking changes course, develops new meanings. It is flexible in its ability to bring together American exceptionalism and problematic historical events, but it falls short in understanding that what we see as progress today may not be how future generations views it.

If we’re to cut to the heart of the matter though concerning how we define progress, local government managers and administrators should know better than to believe that their leadership stands out when doing nothing. “Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart” (Kouzes, Posner 12-3) are the five practices of exemplary leadership as offered in the international bestseller “The Leadership Challenge”. We would be hard pressed to find an equally respected or used guide on organizational management that is based on doing little to nothing because things will naturally work out the way we want. Just as the success of organizations, whether private or public, are found in their effort and action, greater inclusivity is no different.

Spectator progress as said before is a form of progress. It is not our best progress though, just as it doesn’t represent our best leadership, our best projects and programs. The difference between the projects and efforts we are proactive and dedicated to accomplishing are profoundly different than the work we put a minimal effort towards believing it will work out as it should in the end.

Civil Disobedience in Relation to Spectator Progress

The leading theory of modern political activism and change is rooted in civil disobedience. Praised as the means to which national and global icons such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi used to lead large societal changes, they are clear examples of progress that even spectator progress uses. Within the view of spectator progress, the Civil Rights movement was bound to happen, the removal of British rule from India an inevitability. Those involved do not share this sentiment.

“In Gandhi’s view, if the maintenance of an unjust or nondemocratic regime depends on the cooperation, submission and obedience of the populace, then the means for changing or abolishing it lies in the noncooperation, defiance and disobedience of that populace. These, he was convinced, could be undertaken without the use of physical violence, and even without hostility toward the members of the opponent group” (Sharp 84).

Gandhi’s commitment to nonviolence is commonly known. What is less discussed is the more deliberate strategy behind his actions. He considered the roots of colonial power in his country and based a counter to it specifically. Gandhi did not claim that his people would naturally or eventually stop cooperating, submitting, or giving obedience. He saw them as goals, as tools that would take specific actions to accomplish and fully realized. Otherwise colonial rule in India very well could have endured.

During the Civil Rights movement “[African American] drivers (including Dr. King) were arrested for minor, often imaginary, traffic violations. Police intimidation became common. Over thirty threats a day reached the leaders. King’s home was bombed; [African Americans] nearly broke into violence. Another home was bombed. Then nearly one hundred [African American] leaders were arrested, charged with violating an antiboycott law” (Sharp 96).

To say that the Civil Rights movement’s success was natural is to be apathetic to the very real violence and persecution suffered. It also ignores the fact that part of the narrative is those who made the unlawful arrests, those who intimidated, those who set bombs off. This was a clash between two sides, both American, both a part of our history and heritage. That the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed is less a testament of America’s greatness as an entire whole, but instead the greatness of those who struggled on the right side of the conflict.

Does this apply to local government though? In part, we’re better off admitting that in the cases of MLK and Gandhi, government (including local government) were the opposition. It should humble us to know that at minimum, our involvement can be detrimental. Can we instead be an active part of civil disobedience when we represent, are a part of, the institutions that civil disobedience tends to struggle against? “Fundamentally, state civil disobedience probably has to presuppose that political institutions (e.g., the state as a whole, parliaments, courts) can exercise agency akin to that of conventional civil disobedients” (Scheuerman 277). “Revealingly, even theorists who have endorsed the idea that political institutions exhibit moral agency admit that they cannot realistically be viewed as possessing it in this strict sense” (Scheuerman 281). William E. Scheuerman has explored some of the contradictions and constraints in thinking that government institutions can act akin to grassroots organizations. If agents of legitimate authority engage in civil disobedience... is it still civil disobedience? Do such representatives still represent the institutions of authority they are a part of, or do they then act as private individuals? Can an organization truly have a collective moral agency? One can be comprised of moral individuals to be sure, but can our local government as an institution hold the same purity of purpose that a social movement has?

There is a role that local government can play in these efforts. In Gene Sharp’s comprehensive, three volume work, “The Politics of Nonviolent Action”, he identifies seven different methods of “Action by Government Personnel” and two “Domestic Governmental Action” (Sharp 320-37). In brief they are:

- Selective refusal of assistance by government aides
- Blocking of lines of command and information
- Stalling and obstruction

- General administrative noncooperation
- Judicial noncooperation
- Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agencies
- Mutiny
- Quasi-legal evasions and delays
- Noncooperation by constituent government units

For example, in 1945 when Germany entered Oslo, Norway, the leader of the Norwegian fascist party demanded Kristian Weldhaven, the chief of police of the city, to meet him in person. Kristian did not and rebuked the offer. It was several months later before Kristian was removed and arrested despite his noncompliance with the new regime (Sharp 331). Another case involves early American Colonial actions against the British Monarchy, town meetings and colonial legislatures meeting in official capacities to discuss and propose actions that were not permissible according to Great Britain such as making the decision to ignore the Stamp Act in 1765 (Sharp 337).

These are of course more extreme examples. One was started by foreign occupation, the other the kindling of what would lead to a full blown, violent revolution. What they are meant to serve as are examples where government bureaucrats and officials have taken the roles of the disobedient. Just as extreme situations led to extreme measures so too can administrators find themselves in less extreme (but still problematic) situations and thus employ less extreme forms of resistance as well. In contrast to the idea that administrators' highest calling is to implement the law as given, those of us in a position of implementation do have the responsibility to weigh what the results of our actions will be and either mitigate or eliminate any harm it may cause residents, especially those who already are disenfranchised.

This does come with an amount of risk. Making an interpretation of vague, general mandates with broad goals and aspirations isn't uncommon in administration. Interpreting a law or directive one way, and intentionally taking an alternative approach is another matter. In better circumstances, starting a dialogue, presenting research, conducting trainings and facilitations can serve as lawful and collaborative ways to sway decision makers and other stakeholders. In some situations these may be insufficient and local government bureaucrats must contend with a difficult choice and either acquiesce, resist, resign, or a combination thereof.

Civil Disobedience is only one theory, one discourse of which to look at spectator progress. Those involved, including those who act as members of government, are not bystanders. There are clear methods and cases where local governments have sought greater diversity, or resisted oppression, and the same methods can be applied today albeit in the context of current events and situations.

Postmodernism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism in Relation to Spectator Progress

Although finding all of the critiques of the concept of progress happening naturally and inevitably goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting a few other theories as evidence that more than just civil disobedience is at odds with the concept. Postmodernism, feminism, and postcolonialism are all detailed and well-established systems of thinking that branch off into many different subdisciplines. Here, we look at examples of where they intersect with the public sector and the idea of progress.

Postmodernism, a reaction to modernist thought, tends to be self-reflective, relative, and denies universal truths in exchange for subjective, human truths. "[A]ttention should be drawn to

the governance reforms, the search for an optimum and effective model and its logical structure keeping in mind the fact that one of the important instruments of postmodernism is dismantling” (Raksnys, Minkevicius 338). On top of the general reforms already being made within the public sector, Raksnys and Minkevicius in their work “The Problem Of Reconciliation Of New Public Governance And Postmodernism: The Conditions Of Returning To Communitarianism” explore the potential of using “tribal marketing”. Tribal marketing is normally used by the private sector defining a certain consumer base with shared beliefs and habits, yet they see the potential for public sector use. Finding a “tribal market” and working alongside it in a cooperative way to bring about citizen input, bring niche groups into the process that otherwise have no outlet can offer meaningful community engagement (Raksnys, Minkevicius 346-50).

Feminism focuses on the perspectives and experiences of the world through a female lens, one of the more common attributes is to position us (and others) in situations as opposed to trying to be neutral observers. “Not even the best-intentioned NGOs are exempt from the tendency of the Development Industry to ignore, misinterpret, displace, supplant, or undermine the capacities that people already have” (Eade 633). Deborah Eade self-reflects her role in development NGOs on how the metrics used to fund and implement development projects seldom match the perspectives and abilities of the communities they are meant to serve. She explores the power dynamics of provider and recipient.

This applies to local government as well. We have a tendency to paint ourselves as neutral, as somehow outside of situations. In our perspective, in our lens, we are following our Municipal Code, or job description, or code of ethics, or some other provided guide that we can use to support our claim of neutrality. In the perspectives of our residents, our actions are either helping them or harming them (or neither or both). In the eyes of others, we may be anything but neutral, a very tangible source of support or undermining of their own lives and hopes from trying to change the zoning of their property, to starting a citizen initiative to help a group in need. We can, in our own opinions, decide that progress is natural and our role of observer is fine. To others, this decision may have deep impacts on their own efforts for social justice.

Postcolonialism is a response to the colonial rule of Western powers across the world, discusses the lasting impacts of colonial eras as well as modern practices that continue to reinforce traditional ruler and ruled, powerful and weak institutions.

“So long as [settler countries such as the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada] ignore issues of race, the ‘new world’ is egalitarian, compared with the inegalitarian ‘old power’... the developing welfare states [mentioned above] are strongly associated with a racialized politics of inclusion and domination (including their forms of labour). Each of the white settler countries had serious exclusions of indigenous – ‘first nation’ – people, including policies the openly acknowledged that they would cease to exist.” (Bhambra and Holmwood 580-1).

In their critique of the liberal welfare state, Bhambra and Holmwood point out some of the most severe actions of countries who promote themselves as altruistic. Under spectator progress, the improvement is the focus point, the most important part of our historical narrative. In postcolonialism, the wrongs committed and their lasting impacts are what’s more important and a good deed today does not automatically erase the sins of the past.

It is perhaps the highest standard, the most difficult theory to embrace in our position as local government administrators. Building sidewalks for a poor neighborhood that had none for thirty years doesn’t make those thirty years go away. Putting up some sort of flag or symbol in

support of a disenfranchised group does not exonerate our organizations if they spent over a generation denying rights and enforcing prejudiced laws and programs against said group.

Conclusion

This paper is limited in time, resources, and scope. Any of the sections from the origins of spectator progress, the nature of spectator progress, to the numerous theories and discussions that critique spectator progress can be explored more deeply and holistically. That the term “spectator progress” was created for the sake of this paper is troubling in itself, that there’s not a common terminology means that spectator progress is not sufficiently discussed, debated, and analyzed. Also, although this paper sought to include some concrete examples where applicable, the potential for case studies is limitless, both the local governments who’ve embraced spectator progress, and those who have, or are currently attempting to, overcome it.

Spectator progress is not an ill-intended belief. I truly believe that it stems more from optimism, the desire to see good done along with the genuine belief that overall America as a nation, as a concept, is fundamentally good. It is a belief that is heavily prevalent today. However, “progress” is not one convenient idea, but involves several competing ideas many of which contradict the idea that it occurs naturally. Civil disobedience offers the most conclusive evidence against spectator progress that it takes strategy, struggle, and sacrifice for society to change. Other theories and works shine other problems with spectator progress from our ability to reform our institutions, understand the power dynamics we exist in, and whether we focus primarily on the rights or wrongs we’ve committed.

As one final nod to the Colorado Emerging Managers, I offer a quote from the Leadership Challenge as a final rebuttal to the idea that progress happens naturally.

“There’s no escape. You are now on notice that regardless of title or position, be it at home, in school, the community, or workplace, you must take responsibility for the quality of leadership the people around you observe and receive. You are accountable for the leadership you demonstrate. You set an example, whether you like it or not, whether intentional or not. The conscious decision you must make is how good a leader and role model you want to be. People are watching you, regardless of whether you know it or not. You are having an impact on them, regardless of whether you intend to or not.” (Kouzes, Posner 298).

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