

# Progress

## Fact or Illusion?

Edited by Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish

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**Particular, Universal, and Infinite:  
Transcending Western Centrism and Cultural  
Relativism in the Third World**

*Zhiyuan Cui*

The current debate on the possibility of progress in the Third World is dominated by two contrasting positions. In one view, the Third World must accept the existing Western institutions and ideas as a whole package for the sake of "progress"; in another view, the particular cultural and institutional traditions in the Third World must be preserved as they are, and any outside criticism of local traditions is neither possible nor desirable. The former view is Western centrism, the latter cultural relativism.

I will argue in this chapter that the both views are seriously misleading. One simple example is enough to illustrate the inadequacy of both. In many of today's third world countries, women's rights are still restricted and even repressed. Are we going to accept this as culturally given? Or if we want to break the local tradition in order to improve women's social position, does it mean we must also adopt existing Western institutions as a whole? The answer to both questions is no.

This example points to the problem that lies in both views' failure to grasp the dialectical relationship between the "particular" and the "universal." In a sense, they both overcelebrate their particular traditions, though for different reasons. The Western centrists celebrate their particular tradition because they mistakenly view their particular institutions and ideas as universally valid; in contrast, the cultural relativists just celebrate their particular tradition for its own sake. What they both lack is a view of the "universal" being both embodied in and separated from the particulars.

The central theme of this chapter is that the "universal" underlying all these particular traditions is "human self-assertion." Different societies and cultures present different degrees of human self-assertion, but none of them

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will ever be able to exhaust its possible meanings. This notion of “human self-assertion” is due to Hans Blumenberg, who defines it as “an existential program according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him.”<sup>1</sup> Though Blumenberg mainly discusses human self-assertion in the context of early modern Europe, we can easily discover its germ latent in almost all other parts of the world.

The first section of the chapter develops my understanding of human self-assertion, by exploring three philosophical concepts: particular, universal, and infinite. The second section, by drawing on some concrete historical cases, shows that Western centrists and cultural relativists both misunderstand the “infinite” nature of human self-assertion. The last section argues that the chance of possible progress in the Third World lies in institutional innovation, that is, the invention of institutions that have so far been absent in both the West and the Third World. I will put the shareholding-cooperative system (SCS) in Chinese rural industry in the perspective of the current Western debates over property rights, arguing that the Chinese SCS represents an institutional innovation with the feature of “disintegrated property.”

In Hans Blumenberg’s fascinating *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the theme of “human self-assertion” is closely related to the theme of “possible progress.” He distinguishes between “possible” and “inevitable” progress. In his view, the notion of progress as an inevitable process is certainly not essential to human self-assertion; indeed, it might almost be described as its antitheses. Blumenberg argues forcefully that “possible progress” is overextended to “inevitable progress” due to the efforts of modern thinkers to “reoccupy” the positions of medieval Christian schema of creation and eschatology. As the translator of Blumenberg’s book explains, “Christianity, he says, through its claim to be able to account for the overall pattern of world history in terms of the poles of creation and eschatology, had put in place a new question, one that had been unknown to the Greeks: the question of the meaning and pattern of world history as a whole. When modern thinkers abandoned the Christian ‘answers,’ they still felt an obligation to answer the questions that went with them—to show that modern thought was equal to any challenge.”<sup>2</sup>

The implications of Blumenberg’s distinction between “possible progress” and “inevitable progress” are profound. They amount to recharting the future of progress according to the human potential of self-assertion, rather

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1. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 138.

2. *Ibid.*, xx–xxi.

than imposing a "pattern of history" onto human self-assertion. But, given the importance of the notion of human self-assertion to Blumenberg's whole argument, why doesn't he give it a precise definition? The answer, I think, is to be found in the "infinite" nature of human self-assertion. Harry Wolfson has given an interesting interpretation of the notion of "infinite":

In medieval discussions of infinity the term "infinite" is said to have two meanings. It may be an accident either of magnitude or of number, or it may be an essence, that is to say, a self-existent substance, immaterial like soul and intellect. As an accident of magnitude it means an unlimited distance or length, something that has no end or boundary. As an accident of number, it means something that is endlessly addible or divisible. "Finite" as the antithesis of this kind of infinite means just the opposite, a distance that is bounded and a number that is limited, or, in other words, something comparable with others of its kind and exceeded by them.

But an essentially infinite substance means something entirely different. It means a substance whose essence is unique and so incomparable that it cannot suffer any form of limitation and hence cannot have any form of positive description, for every description necessarily implies a limitation, or as Spinoza puts it: "determination is negation." To call a substance infinite in this sense is like calling voice colorless. When voice is described as colorless it does not mean the negation of a property which we should expect it to have and which it may have, but rather the absolute exclusion of voice from the universe of color . . .<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, human self-assertion belongs to the second form of "infinite." This notion of infinite is in turn closely related to the notion of "universal," as Roberto Unger's following interpretation makes clear:

The universal must exist as a particular, just as a person is inseparable from his body. There is no formal universality, no circumstance in which the universal can be abstracted from its particular form. It always exists in a concrete way. Yet no single particular incarnation of the universal exhausts its meaning or its possible modes of existence. Thus, there is no one state of a person's body that at any given time, or over the course of his life, reveals all the sides of his identity . . . In this conception, the universal and the particular are equally real though they represent different kinds of reality. The universal is neither abstract and formal, nor capable of being identified with a single concrete and substantive particu-

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3. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 133-34.

lar. Instead, it is an entity whose universality consists precisely in the open set of concrete and substantive determinations in which it can appear . . .<sup>4</sup>

Unger's characterization of the dialectical relation between universal and particular is certainly very much in the tradition of Aristotle and Hegel. For example, Aristotle believes that "form" has infinite embodiments in "matter," but that "matter" can never exhaust "form." In other words, the form cannot exist apart from matter, but it is capable of assuming different embodiments. However, I want to stress here that the relation between universal and particular also is crucial in many other cultures. Taoism in China is about the relation between "one" (universal) and "many" (particular). Because Tao is unitary and consequently cannot be more or less present in some things than in others, the equality of all things is assured; but because Tao is present in individual things, it is possible to talk of individual differences between things. The paradox of how the One can be in the Many and yet retain its unity had long-range effects on religious Taoism and on Chinese Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

The parallel questioning of relationship between One (universal) and Many (particular) in Taoism indicates that this very relationship is a focus of intellectual pursuits in many cultures. In my view, it is exactly because human self-assertion—with its concepts of "infinite" and "universal"—is embodied in many different particular traditions that we can talk meaningfully about the following things: (1) learning between traditions; (2) self-transformation of the given tradition; and (3) outside criticism of a given tradition, without assuming any particular tradition as the only embodiment of the "universal."

What is wrong with Western centrism? It is its insensitivity to the diversity and tension within third world cultures. Max Weber's understanding of Confucianism in China is a case in point. In his *Religion of China*, Weber characterizes the Confucian as a gentleman politely accommodating himself to the status quo.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in Weber's view, we cannot speak of Confucians as prophets, who constantly challenge the existing order. This characterization overlooks the tension between the given world and Heaven's imperative within a Confucian mind. In fact, according to Confucius, it is the imperatives of Heaven that serve as the ultimate criteria in judging human affairs. This makes

4. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 143.

5. Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969).

6. Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trans. Hans Gerth (New York: MacMillan, 1965), 227.

at least some Confucians "prophetic," in the sense of being the voice of transcendence and transformation of the existing order.

This example illustrates the fact that Christian tradition cannot exhaust the possible forms and meanings of transcendence. Indeed, Shmuel Eisenstadt has called Confucianism "this-worldly transcendentalism."<sup>7</sup> To the extent that transcendentalism contributes to human self-assertion by encouraging "social iconoclasm," Weber's mistake in understanding Confucian transcendentalism shows once again the "infinite" nature of possible forms of human self-assertion.

The insensitivity of Western centrism to the diversity and tension within third world cultures also results in insensitivity to the diversity and tension within Western culture itself. This is only natural: indeed, they are the two sides of the same coin. Take Weber as an example again. When Weber defines *prophet* as "a purely individual bearer of charisma,"<sup>8</sup> he necessarily overlooks the very complexity of "prophecy" in the Western tradition. According to Harry Wolfson's important study on Philo, ever since Philo substituted Plato's theory of "recollection" as the highest kind of knowledge with prophecy, prophecy has performed at least four functions and assumed three forms.<sup>9</sup> The details of Wolfson's analysis will not concern us here. My point is simply that once we recognize the infinite nature of "the universal," we must realize that both Western and non-Western traditions are just "particulars." Western centrism's claim to the status of the universal for the particular Western tradition is a mistake, because it directly equates "finite particular" with "infinite universal."

The following statement by Cornelius Castoriadis vividly demonstrates this mistake:

Before Greece and outside the Greco-Western tradition, societies are instituted on a principle of strict closure: our view of the world is the only meaningful one, the "others" are bizarre, inferior, perverse, evil, or unfaithful. As Hannah Arendt has said, impartiality enters this world with Homer . . . This is the meaning of the creation of historiography in Greece. It is a striking fact that historiography properly speaking has existed only during two periods of human history: in ancient Greece, and in modern Europe—that is, in the cases of the two societies where ques-

7. S. N. Eisenstadt, *This-Worldly Transcendentalism and the Structuring of the World: Weber's Religion of China and the Format of Chinese History and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1983).

8. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 46.

9. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 3-

tioning of existing institutions has occurred. In other societies, there is only the undisputed reign of tradition, and/or simple "recording of events" by the priests or the chroniclers of the kings.<sup>10</sup>

Any careful reader of Joseph Needham's *Science in Traditional China* will easily perceive how wrong Castoriadis, or Hanna Arendt, was. Interestingly, Castoriadis is the founder of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, publication of the noncommunist revolutionary group that greatly influenced the 1968 student-worker rebellion in France. This fact shows how pervasive Western centrism is!

Having criticized Western centrism, let us now turn to cultural relativism. What is wrong with cultural relativism?

Basically, cultural relativism is a pseudo-historicalism. It insists that the sole discourse we can have about our subjective experience of social life is a particularizing discourse: the attempt to explicate and elaborate the assumptions that distinguish a given culture from all others. But, as Roberto Unger sharply points out, this prohibition "imposes an arbitrary constraint upon the principle of historicity because it fails to recognize that the extent to which our contexts imprison us and reduce us to a compulsive passivity is itself one of the things up for grabs in history. This unhistorical limit upon historical variability illustrates the indefensible version of the modernist view of our relation to our contexts: the version that combines skepticism with surrender, by teaching that all we can do is to choose a social world or a tradition of discourse and to play by its rules."<sup>11</sup>

In *A Quiet Revolution*, an eloquent study of women's education in rural Bangladesh, Martha Chen describes her effort as a member of a government development group, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, to increase the rate of female literacy in rural areas. The project began from a conviction that literacy is an important ingredient in the development of these women toward a better life. This conviction did not derive naturally from the local traditions of the villages, where women were repressed to the extent that they were not allowed to go marketing.<sup>12</sup> Chen's and her group's initial effort failed, because the content of their textbook was not related to the local context and hence seemed to be irrelevant to the lives of local women. But Chen's group never abandoned the conviction that literacy is important for these

10. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford Odéon, 1991), 82, 114.

11. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Passion: An Essay in Personality* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 79-80.

12. M. Chen, *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1986).



village women's self-development. By trying new textbooks and exploring a local cooperative network, they finally succeeded in getting local women interested in learning how to read.<sup>13</sup>

This example indicates that we don't have to be the prisoner of an arbitrary, particular culture. We have the capacity to change it if we want to. The elements or germs of human self-assertion exist in every culture. Cultural relativism amounts to the denial of this human potential of infinite self-assertion. Ironically, the cultural relativists' proposition "anything goes" is just another way of uncritically celebrating particular traditions; thus, they are no different from Western centrists in this respect.

I hope that so far the inadequacy of both Western centrism and cultural relativism has been demonstrated. In a nutshell, both views downplay the infinite nature of human self-assertion. They arbitrarily limit human creativity to some particular traditions. In order to make "possible" progress in the Third World, we must transcend both Western centrism and cultural relativism. The key is to engage in institutional innovations that are new to both today's West and the Third World. Let me illustrate this point with a discussion of institutional innovation in Chinese rural industry.

Chinese economic reform since the late 1970s has been considered a successful story by many partial and impartial observers. From 1978 to 1994, real gross national product (GNP) grew at an average annual rate of 12 percent, and per capita GNP doubled in real terms. Especially, rural industry is the most dynamic sector in the whole period.

Chinese rural industry goes far beyond traditional handicraft. It belongs to all China's 40 major modern industrial sectors, except petroleum and natural gas extraction. While the average annual rate of increase in total output value of the whole country between 1980 and 1988 was 11.8 percent, the total output value of rural industry increased annually at the rate of 33.2 percent. It is rural industry rather than grain production that accounts for the increase of peasant incomes.

Two striking features are to be noticed in Chinese rural industrialization. First, it is very unusual among today's developing countries. In many of these countries, the existence of industrial urban centers gives rise to rural-urban migration that exceeds the capacity of the cities to employ new settlers. In fact, not only in today's developing countries, but also in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century France, industrial urban centers had "a limited capacity to transform and absorb the traditional sector, leaving the peasantry

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13. Martha Nussbaum has used Chen's case to support her Aristotelian approach to "non-relative virtues": Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1993).

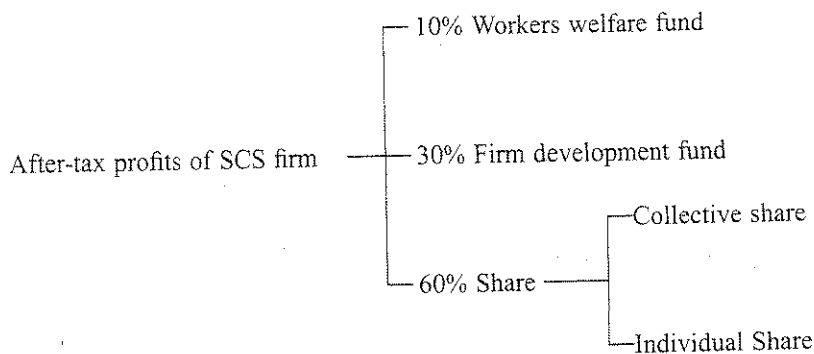
with a peripheral role in the industrialization process."<sup>14</sup> The Western way of industrialization and urbanization may be unique and uncopiable for other countries. In this sense, innovation, rather than coping the existing Western institutions, is a necessary condition of progress in the Third World.

Second, and more importantly, Chinese rural industry developed a new type of ownership structure. In their effort to create a proper ownership form for rural enterprises, the Chinese "peasant-workers" and their community governments have designed an ingenious shareholding-cooperative system. After three years of experiments in three areas in Shandong, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, the Ministry of Agriculture issued "The Temporary Regulations for Peasant's Shareholding-Cooperative Enterprises" in February, 1990. It indicates that this form of collective ownership will become more and more important in Chinese rural enterprises. This SCS is an indigenous innovation on the part of Chinese peasantry. I conducted preliminary field research in the summer of 1993 in the Zhoucun district of Zibo (Shandong province), where the SCS was invented in 1982 as a response to the difficulties of dismantling the collective properties of the People's Commune. The peasants found that some collective properties (other than land) are simply physically indivisible. They decided to issue shares to each "peasant-worker" on equal terms, instead of destroying the collective property (such as trucks) by selling them in pieces (which had occurred in many other regions). Soon after, they realized (or conceded) that they should not divide up all collective properties into individual shares to the current work force, because the older generation of "peasant-workers" had left the enterprises, and the local governments had made previous investments. Thus, they decided to keep some proportion of "collective shares," which would not go into individual labor shares. These collective shares are designed to be held by outside corporate bodies, such as local governmental agencies, other firms in and out of the locality, banks, and even universities and scientific research institutions. The following figure shows the flow of profits of SCS in Zhoucun District.

Clearly, the development of SCS is the joint product of two factors: (1) accumulated change in Chinese rural institutions (such as the dissolution of the commune) and (2) improvised solutions to the indivisibility of commune property. However, the significance of SCS is much broader. It challenges the conventional Western theory of consolidated property rights that goes back to William Blackstone in the eighteenth century. In essence, the SCS system is an example of a disintegrated property rights arrangement. Let me be more specific about the distinction between "consolidated" and "disintegrated" property.

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14. Colin Haywood, "The Role of the Peasantry in French Industrialization, 1815-80," *Economic History Review* 34, no. 3 (1981): 300.



**Fig. 1. Distribution of profits in the shareholding-cooperative system of Zhoucun district of Zibo, Shangdong province**

Basically, the “consolidated” view of property seeks to “concentrate in a single entity, usually an individual person, the relevant rights, privileges, and powers of possessing, using, and transferring discrete assets.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the “disintegrated” view conceives property as a “bundle of rights,” which can be distributed among different holders, be it individuals or collectives. The current Western legal debates are between the conventional “consolidated” view and the emerging “disintegrated” view. Thomas Grey explains these two views clearly as follows:

Most people, including most specialists in their unprofessional moments, conceive of property as things that are owned by persons. To own property is to have exclusive control of something—to be able to use it as one wishes, to sell it, give it away, leave it idle, or destroy it. Legal restraints on the free use of one’s property are conceived as departures from an ideal conception of full ownership. By contrast, the theory of property rights held by the modern specialist tends both to dissolve the notion of ownership and to eliminate any necessary connection between property rights and things. Consider ownership first. The specialist fragments the robust unitary conception of ownership into a more shadowy “bundle of rights.” Thus, a thing can be owned by more than one person, in which case it becomes necessary to focus on the particular limited rights each of the co-owners has with respect to the thing.<sup>16</sup>

15. Gregory Alexander, “The Dead Hand and the Law of Trusts in the Nineteenth Century,” *Stanford Law Review* (May, 1985): 1189.

16. Thomas Grey, “The Disintegration of Property,” *Nomos* 22 (1980): 69.

The crucial point of the "bundle of rights" view is that "what we call property is merely a collection of heterogeneous faculties. These faculties can be broken up and assigned to different entities."<sup>17</sup> None of the holders of these faculties has the exclusive right with regard to the whole bundle of property rights.

The implications of this "bundle of rights" view of property are far-reaching. "The substitution of a bundle-of-rights for a thing-ownership conception of property has the ultimate consequence that property ceases to be an important category in legal and political theory."<sup>18</sup> As Joseph Singer points out,

phrasing the problem as "identifying the owner" is fundamentally wrong. It is simply not the right question. To assume that we can know who property owners are, and to assume that once we have identified them their rights follow as a matter of course, is to assume what needs to be decided. Property interests can be divided in various ways, including: (1) over time (current versus future interests); (2) into co-ownership (joint tenancy, tenancy in common, partnership, corporations); (3) into leases (landlord/tenant relations); (4) into trusts (trustee/beneficiary); (5) into easements and covenants; and (6) into mortgages (mortgagor/mortgagee). Who owns the property in these cases? The landlord or the tenant? The trustee or the beneficiary? The mortgagor or the mortgagee? The question is meaningless. Just as the landlord, life tenant, defeasible fee owner, trustee, and fee simple owner may be "owners" of property, so may tenants, reversioner, trust beneficiaries, holders of future interests, and owners of easements. There are even cases in which it is difficult to identify anyone as the owner. Who owns a university? The board of trustees? The graduates? The students?<sup>19</sup>

Though the latest development of Western legal theory endorses the disintegrated view of property, the Western practice is still dominated by the consolidated view of property. Thus, the current industrial restructuring in the West has a lot to do with the difficult introduction of disintegrated property relations to the various stakeholders of the firm.

However, when we look at Chinese rural enterprises from this perspective, we find distinctly disintegrated property rights. It is the particular form of

17. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

18. Grey, "Disintegration of Property," 81.

19. Joseph Singer, "The Reliance Interest in Property," *Stanford Law Review* (February, 1988): 611-751.

arrangement of the bundle of property rights rather than cultural relativism or Western centrism that explains the success of Chinese rural enterprises.

The Chinese practice of the SCS suggests that the right question to ask about reform in China or anywhere else is not who the consolidated exclusive owner is, but how the bundle of property rights is being disintegrated and recombined. The lesson is very relevant for Western industrial restructuring.

Viewed as pure types, shareholding and cooperative systems are in conflict. The principle of shareholding is, as practiced by most conventional capitalist joint-stock companies, "one share, one vote." It is a system that mainly serves the outside stockholders' interest. In contrast, the principle of the cooperative system is, as advocated as early as by John Stuart Mill, "one worker, one vote," which mainly serves the interests of internal laborers. The conflict of these two principles is most vividly reflected in the so-called "degeneration problem" of workers' cooperatives in the capitalist environment: if a cooperative is successful, it becomes the target of buyout by external investors; if it does not resort to external financing in the first place, or only issues nonvoting shares to the outsiders, it becomes uncompetitive and therefore ruins itself.

In order to reconcile the conflict of interest between outside investors and inside workers, the Nobel laureate James Meade has proposed a system of "discriminating labor-capital partnerships." In this system, each firm will issue two kinds of share certificates, namely:

1. Capital share certificates which would be distributed to all the persons who were in fact receiving directly or indirectly through profit, interest, rent, etc., the capitalists' 20 per cent share of the firm's revenue . . .
2. Labor share certificates which would be distributed to all employees pro rata to their individual earnings of the remaining 80 per cent of the firm's revenue.

All share certificates, whether capital or labor, would carry an entitlement to the same rate of dividend . . . everyone concerned in the operation of the business would now have a share in the future success or failure of the enterprise.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese stockholding-cooperative system is similar to Meade's labor-capital partnership in that both systems have labor shares and capital shares;<sup>21</sup> however, the Chinese SCS is distinct in that capital shares themselves

20. James Meade, "Forms of Share Economy," in *Collective Papers of James Meade*, vol. 2 (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 235.

21. It is important to notice that both systems differ significantly from the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) in the United States. ESOP promotes "worker participation in the firm's

are mainly collective, in the sense of belonging to the representatives of the community—township and village governments. Thus, the SCS in China's rural industry serves to harmonize the interests of inside workers and outside members of the same community. While Meade's system is only a theoretical proposal, the Chinese practice of the SCS will provide many useful lessons for this kind of institutional innovation forthcoming in the West.

Therefore, the SCS in China's rural industry is a good example of institutional innovation in a third world country, which turns out to be a contribution to the theoretical and institutional development in the West as well.

To summarize, the Third World has an opportunity to transcend both Western centrism and cultural relativism so that all parts of the world can bravely engage in institutional innovations that will contribute to the progressive course of human self-assertion by humankind as a whole. This kind of institutional innovation, in essence, is the core of democratic experimentalism, which promises to give a new meaning to the notion of "progress" in the twenty-first century.

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fortunes only in so far as a part of the work's past pay has taken the form of compulsory savings rather than the receipt of freely disposable income, whereas Labor Share Certificates depend directly upon the employee's current supply of work and effort to the firm without any reference to past compulsory savings" (James Meade, *Alternative Systems of Business Organization and of Workers' Remuneration*) (London, Allen and Unwin, 1986), 117.