

# Natural Allies? Education and the Idea of Progress

International conference  
at University of Zurich **3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> of September 2024**

## Speakers

**Philip Kitcher**

Columbia University

**Anders Schinkel**

VU Amsterdam

**Randall Curren**

University of Rochester

**Roland Reichenbach**

University of Zurich

**Sheron Fraser-Burgess**

Ball State University

**Frauke Albersmeier**

HHU Düsseldorf

**Jürgen Oelkers**

University of Zurich

**Leonie Stibor**

Humboldt University of Berlin

**Arvi Särkelä**

ETH Zurich

**Douglas Yacek**

TU Dortmund

**Andrea English**

University of Edinburgh

**Miguel Zulaica y Mugica**

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## Organized by

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Ideas of progress are traditionally conceived as genuinely educational ideas. They are not only educational in the sense that they are based on comprehensive ideals about human development, whose advancement is considered in principle possible (if not always fully conscious and intentional). They can be also qualified as educational because they assume that these positive social developments depend on a growing capacity to learn and also in central respects consist in more or less open-ended intergenerational processes of learning, experience and transformation. Education thus serves both as the very precondition as well as the means and ends of social processes that result in the gradual realization of the aims of progress (either understood as immanent to processes of progress or external to it). This holds for all the different dimensions of progress, from the social, political and moral to the economic and scientific-technological, which all not just heavily rely on educational assumptions and developments (such as an educational infrastructure in the form of a functioning educational system), but in itself consist of social processes that can also be qualified as educational processes (e.g., moral progress as a form of moral educational process). This close relationship clearly holds for older notions of progress as a universal, linear, teleological and more or less automatically enfolding educational process, which is often primarily associated with the European enlightenment tradition and its reliance on developmental models and associated educational metaphors (such as the `childhood of mankind´ and other metaphors which have rightfully being criticized for their role in colonial or imperial justifications of sociopolitical hierarchies and domination). And it also seems to hold for newer accounts of progress that heavily rely on educational ideas and ideas about education in general and about educational dimensions of progress in particular. In light of these similarities, one could even state that progress not just forms one of the preconditions of progress or is tied up with progress in different ways, but that education – at least in important respects – could be considered as the very *raison d'être*, the end of progress.

However, despite these close relationships between different forms of education and progress as (alleged) natural allies, they have seldom been explored systematically in contemporary debates. A first major reason for this neglect is the widespread critique that traditional notions of progress were complicit with colonialism and imperialism and can neither accommodate the atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nor the manifold crises of our contemporary world. Progress, according to this line of critique thus is just another grand narrative that at best seems an unrealistic and naive idealistic idea and at worst a form of Western triumphalism. Thus, ideas of progress as a result are often viewed not just with suspicion in academic debates, but as essentially politically contaminated. A second and related reason is that this faith is also to a certain extent shared by ideas of education associated with ideas of progress, whose traditional progressive developmental logic increasingly has lost credibility, often for the very same reason that ideas of progress are (e.g., for relying on allegedly universal stages of development, that have been used to justify relations of domination; for their entanglement with and reproduction of questionable societal hierarchies). If we lost faith in the progressive and transformative force of educational practices and ideas (such as personal and political autonomy and emancipation), this will also have negative repercussions on the ideas of progress they are both based on and intent to promote. One could even argue that if education is the end of progress, that the `end´ of progress as a believable educational idea, also implies that the idea of education as a value-based and goal directed, intergenerational process itself comes to an `end´. This seems to be the case, because it remains unclear how we could justify educational arrangements and institutions without relying on the idea of not just an open, but also a better future. A third reason is the influence of power-theoretical approaches in educational theory and philosophy of education that not only tend to highlight the power-driven logic of discourses of progress as well as the ideological misuse of the idea of progress, but also assume that the very idea of progress, be it with respect to educational practices and the way children are treated or in social and political contexts, is impossible to justify. Thus, according to this perspective, we may speak of educational, social, political and moral changes and transformations, but cannot evaluate these changes and transformations as better or worse, as progressive or regressive.

The major aim of this conference is to engage with these and other challenges and problems by critically discussing the manifold relationships between education and progress as well as the prospects and pitfalls of conceptions of education as progress. In so doing it aims to bring together historians, philosophers of education, political and social philosophers as well as educational and social scientists that are interested in questions related to progress and education.





**Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> of September**  
**10:00-12:00 | 14:00-16:00**

**Introduction**

(Franziska Felder; University of Zurich & Johannes Drerup; VU Amsterdam/ TU Dortmund)

**Education and progress in historical perspective**

**Between the supernatural and the unnatural:  
“Nature” and “progress” in the educational thinking of enlightenment**  
(Roland Reichenbach; University of Zurich)

**Must critique be progressive?**  
(Arvi Särkelä; ETH Zurich)

**Education and progress: Some lessons from history**  
(Jürgen Oelkers; University of Zurich)

**Wednesday, 4<sup>th</sup> of September**  
**09:00-12:00 | 14:00-17:00**

**Education without progress? Critiques and contestations**

**Unnatural allies: Education and the idea of progress**  
(Anders Schinkel; VU Amsterdam)

**Progress-enabling education and the case of transmitted speciesism**  
(Frauke Albersmeier; HHU Düsseldorf)

**Future progress as educational project?**  
(Hanno Su; University of Münster)

**Education and progress. Justifications in context**

**Uncertainty, progress and education**  
(Andrea English; University of Edinburgh)

**Progress and the open question of reason**  
(Miguel Zulaica y Mugica; TU Dortmund)

**Hegel and Fanon on progress and emancipation**  
(Leonie Stibor; University of Potsdam)

**Thursday, 5<sup>th</sup> of September**  
**9:00-13:00**

**Education as the end of progress? Conflicts and constellations**

**Educating citizens**  
(Philip Kitcher; Columbia University)

**Irreducible racial groups and irreducible political morality –  
One problem of normative moral progress**  
(Sheron Fraser-Burgess; Ball State University)

**Progress in and through education?  
A new institutionalist perspective**  
(Randall Curren; University of Rochester)

**Friendship, education and moral progress**  
(Douglas Yacek; TU Dortmund)

**Wrap-up and conclusion**  
(Franziska Felder; University of Zurich & Johannes Drerup; VU Amsterdam/ TU Dortmund)

