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Introduction to the symposium on the Report of the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP)

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Introduction to the Symposium on the Report of the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP)

The publication of the first Report of the International Panel on Social Progress is a significant intellectual event, both because of its hugely ambitious aim—of uniting the world’s leading researchers from social sciences and the humanities to develop research-based, multi-disciplinary, non-partisan, action-guiding solutions to the central challenges of our time—and because it represents the completion of a mammoth effort in the service of this aim by a diverse set of two hundred and sixty-nine authors. In its attempt to synthesize and render accessible to social actors a broad range of the latest social scientific knowledge, as well as in its confidence that knowledge can empower those actors to make progress, it recalls D’Alembert and Diderot’s famous *Encyclopédie*. Indeed, one can say that the Report is a quintessential Enlightenment project (cf. Bury 1920). For example, in his famous *Outlines of a Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1796), Condorcet asserts the possibility of an accumulation of empirical and theoretical knowledge and the concomitant expansion in our capacities to alleviate social and natural evils. And Condorcet and many of his contemporaries were motivated to propose political institutions that would enable such an indefinite increase in knowledge so as to bring about the attendant improvement to people’s lives.

The Report’s attempts to articulate a widely shareable vision of what should count as social progress and to harness evidential support for this vision in social science and social experience from across the globe deserve critical scrutiny and debate. Since the Report aims to inform and persuade public and private actors, we decided to invite a number of leading thinkers from international organizations, think tanks, and an internationally active charity to critically analyse parts of the Report’s findings and proposals. These discussions took place on June 8, 2018 at the Centre for the Philosophy of the Natural and Social Sciences at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). This review symposium collects a number of the contributions to this workshop.

Marc Fleurbaey, one of the Report’s initiators and a coordinating lead author, and Matthew Adler, a lead author of the chapter on the contribution of the social sciences to policy and institutional change, outline its aims and key messages. Subsequent contributions engage critically with discrete parts of the Report.

Uma Rani of the International Labor Organization engages with chapter 3 on economic inequality. She argues that the chapter focuses too heavily on redistributive measures to redress inequalities and argues that these need to be supplemented by measures that strengthen the bargaining and organizing power of workers, and by policies that promote structural change and beneficial innovation.

Diana Alarcón, who for many years led the team preparing the United Nations’ *World Economic and Social Survey*, engages with chapter 7, which covers the future of work. She argues that the chapter’s recommendations need to be more tailored to countries’ level of development. A key example, she argues, are the type of labour market reforms needed for progress. While some developed countries need to find ways to increase labour market

flexibility while maintaining security of income and access to basic services, many developing countries rather need to draw their substantial informal sectors, which have both high flexibility and great insecurity, into the formal economy (with its associated social safety net), thereby reducing extreme flexibility but also creating more security.

Alina Rocha Menochal of the Overseas Development Institute and the U.S. Agency for International Development engages with chapters 9 and 14 on inequality, social exclusion and democracy. She argues that the Report gives a compelling explanation of how intra-country social and economic inequalities can undermine the quality of democratic governance. For democracies to be robust, they must therefore find ways of limiting these inequalities and exclusion. Here, however, Rocha Menochal discerns a problem: namely, that democracies have a mixed record on reducing inequality and exclusion. The informal institutions and power relations at work in democracies can readily thwart efforts to tackle social disparities. She concludes by drawing on the Report's findings to identify a series of factors which can nonetheless enable democracies to protect themselves against corrosive inequalities.

James Deane of BBC Media Action, the broadcaster's international development charity, offers his take on chapter 13 on media and communications. He argues that while the chapter notes some of the challenges that the media faces in acting as a progressive force, the situation may well be worse than its authors allow. Deane posits that media that seek to divide and manipulate are on the rise, while media that provide platforms for reasoned, inclusive debate and for holding the powerful to account are in trouble. Finding ways of protecting the public good of a media infrastructure that performs these latter functions is, he concludes, an urgent task for interdisciplinary social science and political philosophy.

Finally, Fleurbaey and Adler respond to the principal ideas and points of criticism put forward by our commentators. They also emphasize the Report's aim to move beyond a standard way of thinking about progress, which equates it with the "catch-up" of other countries to the economically advanced countries' model of economic and social development. Instead, they propose, progress can be defined in part as the establishment of institutions which promote equality of power and the resources that enable people to lead a good life. They also highlight the Report's finding that the innovative policies and institutional reforms that enable such participatory and equitable development can come from countries at every level of development.

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