

## Deconstructing the Universal Subject: Progress and the Authors of the Future in Selected Works by Blaženka Despot\*,<sup>1</sup>

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### *Summary*

This paper examines the notion of the “authorship of the future” in the philosophy of Blaženka Despot within the context of the crisis of the modern idea of progress and its subject. Starting from Despot’s critique of the teleological conceptions of history and the privileged agents of social change, the paper shows that she relocates the concept of progress from the sphere of historical necessity to that of an open, politically contingent social practice. Within the tradition of the Praxis School, Despot develops a conception of the revolutionary subject that does not arise automatically from an objective class position but from the development of self-consciousness, education, and the capacity to reflect upon concrete historical relations. Particular attention is devoted to her feminist critique of Marxist universalism, which reveals that the presumed subject of emancipation is gendered and that the hierarchical structure of emancipatory theories systematically produces the invisibility of women as historical actors. The paper argues that Despot thereby not only expands the subject of

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social change but also reconsiders the very concept of historical authorship and its philosophical presuppositions.

*Keywords:* Blaženka Despot, progress, revolutionary subject, Praxis philosophy, Marxist feminism, women's question, authorship of the future

### *Introduction*

The question of the future and its bearers (or *authors*) is one of the central concerns of modern philosophy of history and its contemporary critiques. From the Enlightenment's confidence in linear and teleological progress, through its radical critiques in the twentieth century, to contemporary debates on the contingency and openness of historical processes, philosophical reflection on the future has remained inseparable from the question of the subject: who has the power to imagine, articulate, and bring about what is yet to come? It is precisely at the intersection of historical temporality and subjectivity that the problem of the authorship of the future emerges, understood not as a descriptive fact but as a concept laden with normative and political implications.

By *authors of the future*, I refer to individuals or groups whose ideas, actions, or creative work significantly shape the ways in which societies imagine, plan, and realise what is yet to come. Here, *authorship* denotes the creation of narratives, visions, technologies, or social models that have a lasting impact on the collective imagination of the future and on its eventual realisation.

The crisis of the modern idea of progress, marked by the collapse of its teleological assumptions and by the delegitimisation of privileged agents of historical change, has called into question not only the belief in the necessity (and plausibility) of a better tomorrow, but also the very forms of political and theoretical action that invoked the future as their justification. In this context, the future is increasingly understood as an open and uncertain horizon whose realisation cannot be guaranteed by historical laws or political elites, but rather depends on concrete practices and the forms of self-consciousness developed by social actors.

Against this background, the present paper examines the philosophy of Blaženka Despot as a particularly revealing point of transition between traditional and contemporary understandings of progress and its subject. Situated within, yet never unreservedly bound to, the tradition of the *Praxis School*, Despot develops an immanent critique of the teleological assumptions of Marxist philosophy of history while at the same time preserving a strong emancipatory horizon. At the centre of her thought lies the question of the revolutionary subject, which, in her account, is constituted neither ontologically nor automatically

through class position, but rather through education, self-consciousness, and the capacity for critical reflection on concrete historical relations, including those that structure the subject itself. Particular importance in Despot's work is given to her feminist critique of Marxist universalism, which demonstrates that the presumed subject of historical change is gendered and that the hierarchical structure of emancipation systematically results in the exclusion of women from both history and the future. In this sense, her reflection on the authorship of the future does not merely expand the subject of emancipation but calls into question the very idea of a universal bearer of historical change. Her philosophy thus opens the possibility of understanding the future not as the necessary outcome of historical progress, but as an open horizon that emerges through reflection on social relations and through struggles to transform intolerable conditions of life.

Methodologically, this paper combines historical-philosophical and conceptual analysis with elements of immanent critique. It begins by reconstructing the broader theoretical context of changing understandings of progress, the future, and their subject within modern philosophy of history. The central part turns to the philosophical work of Blaženka Despot and examines her key texts, including *Humanitet tehničkog društva* (*The Humanity of Technological Society*), *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije* (*The Ideology of Productive Forces and the Productive Force of Ideology*), and *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* (*The Woman Question and Socialist Self-Management*). The analysis focuses on identifying conceptual shifts in the understanding of the revolutionary subject and the authorship of the future, considering Despot's thought in relation to the Praxis tradition while also maintaining a critical distance from it. In particular, the paper traces how her work moves further away from teleological conceptions of progress toward a more consistently contingent and open understanding of the future. Finally, it examines Despot's feminist critique of Marxist universalism and the problem of the invisibility of women as historical subjects, showing how, especially in her later writings, she extends the question of the bearers of progress to include new social movements.

### *The Idea of Progress and the Authorship of the Future*

The role of human beings in shaping the future remains one of the enduring themes of philosophical reflection and continues to attract sustained attention today. The different strands of thought that have emerged around this issue should not be understood merely as parallel or static positions, but rather as historically dynamic formations that undergo internal transformations and transitions, often

under the influence of the *Zeitgeist*. Discussions of this role commonly point to a major turning point that began to take shape in the sixteenth century. At that time, the future, previously framed within an eschatological conception of time, gradually ceased to belong to the sacred realm and to be regarded as unknowable and pre-existing in the form of a predetermined destiny. Instead, it increasingly came to be understood as something that could be shaped by human action, and eventually even treated as an object of planning and exploitation.<sup>2</sup> This radical shift in horizon, strongly supported by the philosophical systems of Bacon, Descartes, and Condorcet, gradually transformed the understanding of the future as open to human intervention into the notion that such intervention unfolds within a necessary, teleological process of historical progress.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary critiques increasingly reject not only the teleology of progress but also the very idea that progress is possible at all. Within these perspectives, the future tends to be portrayed as contingent, indeterminate, and at times even tragic. Among the most vocal proponents of this view are theorists associated with critical theory, postcolonial thought, and postmodernism, who regard the idea of progress as a historically and politically charged narrative, often even as a metanarrative, that transforms injustice into apparent historical necessity. In this sense, Walter Benjamin's well-known image of the angel of history is particularly striking. For Benjamin, history appears as an ideological construction produced by those who hold power (the "winners of history"), who, by privileging and fetishizing their own experience at the expense of the defeated and the oppressed, construct narratives about the linear and unstoppable march of the machine of progress.<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt located the roots of totalitarian evil precisely in teleological conceptions of history.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in their radical critique of the idea of progress, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that science, technology, and capitalism often act less as forces of emancipation and more as forms of regression. From this perspective, genuine

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Barbara Adam and Chris Groves, *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2007); Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Books, 2006); Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Agnes Tam and Margaret Meek Lange, "Progress," in: Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/progress/>.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Frankfurt School: On the Concept of History by Walter Benjamin*, accessed November 14, 2025, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1973).

progress can emerge only through the critical contestation of the hegemonic narratives produced by those who wield power.<sup>6</sup>

As already suggested, the crisis of the idea of progress was accompanied by an equally significant crisis in the idea of the human subject as the bearer of progress, and this unfolded on at least two levels. On the first level, referred to here as the anthropological level, the notion of the human being as the agent of progress and, consequently, as the author of the future was challenged through three complementary arguments. Freud famously described these as the three blows to human self-love, or narcissism.<sup>7</sup> The Copernican blow displaced the human being from the centre of the universe; the Darwinian one returned him to the realm of animals from which he had long sought to distance himself through appeals to reason and the immortal soul; and the third, Freudian blow (“the ego is not master in its own house”) reminded him that the unconscious dimensions of the psyche often exert greater power than conscious ones. With the loss of a central position in the universe, among animals, and ultimately within one’s own mind, the question arises as to the extent to which human intellectual and moral capacities can guide the process of progress and shape a (better) future. Indeed, a different scenario begins to appear more plausible – one in which any human attempt to grasp or direct the future may, in fact, prove harmful to that very future. Such a view stands in stark contrast to the hopes of utopian thinkers and other philosophers of hope, who regard transcendence of the present and orientation toward the future as among the essential features of the human condition.

A second, normative-political level of critique directed at the idea of the human being as the bearer of progress rests on the observation that, historically, the agents of progress have standardly been selected from among elite, rationalised, governing subjects who claim the authority to speak and act in the name of the future of others. The bearer of progress thus proves not to be the universal human being but a politically privileged actor endowed with several forms of power. One of these is epistemic power: the capacity to define the interpretative framework through which reality is understood and, in doing so, to determine both the contours of progress and the means by which it is to be realised. Its consequences often include a narrowing of the horizon of the possible and the delegitimisation of alternative forms of knowledge and perspective, accompanied – at times more, at times less overtly – by the silencing of

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<sup>6</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey (ed.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

dissenting voices. Elite agents of progress also possess political power. Unlike others, who appear merely as objects of progress, they alone hold the authority to decide upon and implement its course. The negative consequences of such power are visible in the paternalistic concentration of decisions about the future in the hands of a minority, while the majority is not only excluded from decision-making processes but also instrumentalised as an object of developmental policies. Political power is accompanied by ethical power, understood as the ability of actors to present their actions as morally necessary, often by appealing to a promised future good, for instance, a “better tomorrow”, and thereby to justify the harm, suffering, or sacrifice that such actions may entail. Through this suspension of moral responsibility, ethical authority creates space for the normalisation of suffering as a necessary phase of progress, for the disqualification of resistance as immoral or regressive, and for the establishment of moral hierarchies of life. Closely intertwined with these forms of power is imaginative power. Here, imagination does not function as an open capacity to envision possible futures, but rather as a normative authority to declare one imagined future as the only legitimate one. By closing off the plurality of possible futures, colonising the social imagination, and establishing the hegemony of a single vision, holders of imaginative power often produce the sense that there is no alternative, portraying every alternative perspective as hostile, or more often as dangerous. Such a naturalisation of a single vision of the future points to what Cornelius Castoriadis describes as the transformation of historically contingent social meanings into the appearance of self-evident necessity.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this can be found in the Nazi project of racial renewal. In this case, pseudo-scientific theories of race determined who was considered “worthy of life” (epistemic power), the totalitarian state implemented racial laws and genocide (political power), the destruction of life was presented as a moral duty toward the nation and its future (ethical power), and all of this was sustained by the dominant myth of a thousand-year Reich and a racially pure future (imaginative power). This example alone is sufficient to call into question the idea of progress and the foundations on which it historically developed.

Contemporary discussions of progress, however, do not end with the declaration of its crisis. In recent decades, the idea of progress has undergone a conditional rehabilitation. In this process, not only the idea of progress itself but also its bearers have re-entered philosophical debate.<sup>9</sup> The connec-

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Tam and Lange, “Progress.”

tion with concrete social conditions is evident here as well. While the crisis of the idea of progress deepened in tandem with the scientific, technological, ecological, and political crises of the twentieth century, a certain revival of the idea occurred with the emergence of contemporary social movements. These movements typically trace their origins to the second half of the twentieth century, while their most visible peaks have occurred over the past decade.<sup>10</sup> Examples are numerous. They range from environmental and anti-war movements to feminist, decolonial, and climate movements, as well as anti-racist activism and movements advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities. Whereas the classical idea of progress often presupposed a single direction of history, privileged agents, and the legitimisation of sacrifice in the name of the future, many of these new movements, though not all to the same degree, have advanced a different understanding of the future. Rather than being imposed upon others in an absolutist manner, the future is conceived as something that must be collectively negotiated and continuously questioned. Progress thus becomes the object of radical reinterpretation and is no longer understood as linear advancement, but as a plural and ethically reflective movement toward more just forms of life.

By rejecting the supposed “neutrality” of knowledge and giving voice to marginalised actors in the production of knowledge, these movements challenge power grounded in epistemological authority. Through participatory and deliberative practices, as well as more horizontal forms of decision-making, they call into question the political power of individuals and the idea that the future is something to be imposed. They also replace the logic of necessary sacrifice with an emphasis on the dignity of every life and with a demand for responsibility in the present, not only in the future. Finally, their experimentation with alternative visions of the future renders imagination emancipatory rather than hegemonic.

In light of these transformations, it is reasonable to ask whether it still makes sense to speak of the idea of progress at all, or whether new conceptual frameworks should be developed to avoid the negative connotations that the notion of progress has carried for decades. What, if anything, remains today of this idea? The answer proposed in this paper is that the idea of progress has, in fact, endured, albeit transformed. What remains are those aspects that constitute its deepest legacy: the conviction that positive change in the world, and the transcendence of existing conditions, are both possible and necessary. It also preserves the belief that injustice is not fate, and that human beings alone are

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

capable of actively contributing to its removal. In this sense, progress remains a kind of moral orientation toward a less unjust, less violent, less repressive, and less aggressive human being and society.

It is interesting to note that the social movements mentioned earlier, often regarded as agents of social change and improvement for their engagement with human rights, are not always willing to align themselves with the idea of progress, even in its rehabilitated form. Environmental movements, for instance, frequently prefer Benjamin's approach of halting catastrophe, a stance vividly illustrated by the image of the climate clock, rather than appealing to the promise of a "better future." Similarly, feminist movements, drawing on thinkers such as Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler, foreground the defence of the conditions of life itself, thereby shifting the focus away from the very grammar of progress – even in its revised, non-teleological formulations – towards the question of liveability;<sup>11</sup> postcolonial movements, in turn, expose the elitist assumptions underlying ostensibly universal narratives of development and the future.<sup>12</sup> The only future these movements tend to acknowledge is the already-mentioned fragile, contingent, and open future, one that can be approached through solidarity, care, and responsibility toward all forms of life and the non-living world alike. The future in question is no longer conceived as a political-economic blueprint or a technological vision, let alone as the guaranteed outcome of a historical process. Rather, it appears as an open field of possibilities that involves numerous political micro-struggles, grassroots activism, and resistance to elitism and all forms of domination.

But can Croatian philosophy be situated within this historical-philosophical and philosophical-historical framework, and if so, how? Have Croatian philosophers engaged with questions of the future, progress, and its agents? The answer to these questions is affirmative. Their broader discussion can be approached through the work of the *Praxis School* and one of its most prominent representatives, the Croatian philosopher Blaženka Despot. In her philosophical work, Despot developed several key themes characteristic of the *Praxis* tradition, some of which relate directly to the question of the future and to those considered most capable of shaping it. Indeed, a significant portion of

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Nancy Fraser et al., *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London – New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan Education, 1988); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

her philosophical oeuvre is devoted to elaborating the conditions under which the authors of the future can emerge and be sustained. In her writings, these agents are described, entirely in line with the intellectual tradition to which she belonged, as *revolutionary subjects*.<sup>13</sup>

While Despot adopts the notion of the revolutionary subject from the Praxis tradition, her work also reconfigures it in significant ways. In particular, I argue that she transforms the understanding of the authors of the future from agents of historically necessary change into subjects whose transformative activity is grounded in a reflexive awareness of one's historically situated position and existentially motivated engagement. This shift unfolds within an already non-teleological framework, but pushes it further toward a more consistently open and contingent understanding of the future. In this way, Despot's philosophical work brings together one of the most significant intellectual turning points of twentieth-century Western philosophy, one that concerns not only a transformation in the understanding of history but also the deconstruction of its subject. The following sections of this paper examine this shift.

### *Blaženka Despot and the Praxis School*

Blaženka Despot (1930–2001)<sup>14</sup> lived through almost all of the major political and economic upheavals of the twentieth century in Southeast Europe, from the socialist promise of progress, in whose critical and emancipatory horizon

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<sup>13</sup> Although I understand the *authors of the future* in a broader sense, one that includes not only those who bring about radical or revolutionary transformations but also those whose contributions to the future may be more modest, in this paper, I occasionally use the term interchangeably with that of *revolutionary subjects*. This usage reflects both the philosophical tradition outlined above and the intellectual orientation of Blaženka Despot.

<sup>14</sup> Blaženka Despot was a Croatian philosopher and sociologist, and one of the most significant representatives of critical Marxist and feminist thought in Croatia. She studied philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb and completed both her master's and doctoral degrees at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana. Closely associated with the circle of the *Praxis School*, her writings addressed questions of humanism, labour, technology, emancipation, the revolutionary subject, and gender equality. Among her most important works are *Humanitet tehničkog društva* (*The Humanity of Technological Society*, 1971), *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije* (*The Ideology of Productive Forces and the Productive Force of Ideology*, 1976), *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* (*The Woman Question and Socialist Self-Management*, 1987), *Emancipacija i novi socijalni pokreti* (*Emancipation and New Social Movements*, 1989), and *"New Age" i moderna* (*New Age and Modernity*, 1995). See, for example, Ana Maskalan, "Blaženka Despot," in: Luka Boršić and Ivana Skuhala Karasman (eds.), *Hrvatske filozofkinje: čitanka* (Zagreb: Institut za filozofiju, 2024), pp. 185–218.

she initially participated actively, to the postsocialist loss of the future, understood as its depoliticisation, privatisation, and fragmentation. This historical experience renders her philosophy both historically situated and theoretically relevant. Precisely this experience of shifting social and intellectual frameworks enabled her to reflect on socialism, Marxism, and their institutional forms not only from the perspective of an internal critique shaped by the experience of her own time, but also from the distance that emerged with the disintegration of a shared political project.

In its early stages, the philosophy of Blaženka Despot was closely connected to that of the Yugoslav *Praxis School*. Within this intellectual circle, the concept of *praxis* referred to the fundamental unity of thought and action, theory and socially transformative practice. Philosophy, accordingly, was not understood as a speculative discipline detached from reality, but as an active and critical activity oriented toward the transformation of the world.<sup>15</sup> Through the work of Praxis philosophers, philosophy thus acquired a central role not only in the interpretation but also in the construction of reality, understood as a form of normative and political intervention, albeit within a specific historical and political context.

One of the defining characteristics of Praxis philosophers was their orientation toward the future, specifically toward a future that, in contrast to dogmatic Marxism, was not understood as already inscribed in the course of history. Drawing on Marx's early philosophy and his conception of the human being as a being of praxis, the Praxis thinkers articulated a humanist and non-dogmatic interpretation of Marxism that rejected Stalinist readings and insisted on *the ruthless critique of everything existing*. In this framework, praxis is understood as both a cognitive and a productive process. Critique is not an end in itself, but a tool for understanding social contradictions and for their revolutionary overcoming in the direction of a humanistically conceived socialism. In this sense, praxis becomes the central category of the *Praxis School's* social epistemology and the foundation of its theoretical and political engagement.

Like the young Marx, who approached it in humanistic rather than fatalistic terms, the Praxis thinkers understood history as an open process in which meaning is not given in advance but is constituted through human praxis. The liberation and realisation of the historically conceived human essence thus appear as a normative orientation, with communism as its horizon. Yet there is no guarantee that communism will necessarily emerge, since its realisation depends on the outcomes of concrete historical struggles. Marx's well-known

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<sup>15</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Čemu Praxis?," *Praxis* 1, no. 1 (1964), pp. 3–8.

thesis that people make their own history, but always under given and inherited conditions,<sup>16</sup> acquires in the Praxis tradition a strongly humanistic meaning. The future is neither a natural necessity nor a historical guarantee, but the result of conscious, critical, and free human activity. In the words of Branko Bošnjak:

“Humanism, in itself, means the demand to shape the content of human communication in such a way that the human being always remains an end, never merely a means to historical goals. In this sense, the “cunning of reason” in history must be avoided, and replaced by freedom rather than cunning, a freedom in which everyone can find their own place and meaning.”<sup>17</sup>

Social change, or revolution, is thus not understood as the inevitable outcome of objective historical laws, but rather as a possibility that depends on the capacity of subjects to act against their alienated structure. The Praxis thinkers therefore rejected a teleological conception of progress while maintaining a strong emancipatory horizon in which the future exists only insofar as it is produced through human praxis. Without action, critique, and the freedom of subjects to transform themselves, the future ceases to be a historical category and becomes merely an abstract projection. In this way, the Praxis thinkers occupy a distinctive intermediary position between the classical idea of progress and the contemporary critiques of power mentioned earlier, since their critique of bureaucratic socialism and technocracy targeted precisely those forms of political and epistemic authority that claim to act in the name of historical necessity, leading them to reject any privileged claim to speak in the name of history.

In the mid-1960s, Blaženka Despot actively participated in the intellectual space opened by the journal *Praxis* for the critique of Stalinist dogmatism and for the reaffirmation of Marxist humanism.<sup>18</sup> Her engagement initially took the form of critical reviews of the work of other authors and later developed into independent theoretical writings in which she articulated some of the most precise and incisive critiques of dogmatic Marxism within the Yugoslav context. Although her philosophical interests, methodological approach, and social engagement clearly placed her within the circle of the Praxis thinkers, Despot never explicitly declared herself a member of the group, maintaining a strong intellectual independence. Indeed, she often developed her own philosophical position in critical opposition to the Praxis theoretical platform, particularly

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, accessed October 18, 2025, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>.

<sup>17</sup> Branko Bošnjak, quoted in Ankica Čakardić, *Dionizijski socijalizam* (forthcoming publication).

<sup>18</sup> Maskalan, “Blaženka Despot.”

by drawing attention to what she regarded as the unfinished character of their project of social transformation:

“Despot developed her critique of dogmatism within the horizon of Marxist-humanist reflection, yet she also moved a step beyond the typical, though extensive, repertoire of Praxis philosophy. Her appeal to humanism did not consist solely in a critical reading of betrayed socialist ideals or in a critique of the dogmatic modes of thought characteristic of the ruling structures of the time, which were reflected in the broader sphere of intellectual production. Rather, Despot also incorporated into her humanist philosophy a critique of Marxist humanism itself. She did so because she detected within Yugoslav Praxis philosophy a certain reproduction of patriarchal patterns of thought, as well as an unjustified neglect of questions of gender equality and emancipation, which she regarded as integral components of any humanist project, particularly one grounded in Marxist humanism. For Blaženka Despot, dogmatism constituted a necessary element of every patriarchal spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Progress in the Works of Blaženka Despot*

With regard to the question of progress, particularly in the early phase of her work, Blaženka Despot largely adhered to the positions associated with the Praxis tradition. In her book *Humanitet tehničkog društva* (*The Humanity of Technological Society*, 1971), which also served as her doctoral dissertation, she rejected the vulgar-Marxist identification of progress with the development of the productive forces, as well as the widespread assumption that technological development automatically leads to a higher stage of society. Instead, she insisted that progress does not primarily depend on technical advancement, but on the realisation of humanity, including, among other things, liberation from the condition of being treated merely as a means:

“<...> Technology, as the most rational and efficient means, appears as a tool. The tool is a means of labour, labour power is a means, the human being is a means, nature is a means. All of these are means directed toward purposive labour, and that labour itself becomes a means of capital. The ultimate end, therefore, is capital, that is, wealth. The constant accumulation of wealth creates the appearance of a permanent purpose, as well as the illusion of an open history and of progress, since this very progress is correlated with the most efficient and most highly valued means, namely technology.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ankica Čakardić, *Dionizijski socijalizam* (forthcoming publication), manuscript, p. 190.

<sup>20</sup> Blaženka Despot, *Humanitet tehničkog društva* (Centar za društvene djelatnosti omladine RK SOH, 1971), p. 58.

The Praxis-inspired return to the young Marx is also evident in Despot's distinction between *instrumental labour* and *self-realising labour*, which enables her to reformulate the concept of progress. Progress is thus measured by the degree to which labour ceases to function merely as a means of survival and becomes a self-realising activity, one that allows human beings to affirm their own essence as free and creative beings. In this way, progress loses the status of an objective historical necessity and instead appears as an open, politically conditioned possibility for transforming both the organisation of labour and the broader forms of social life.

“Instrumental labour, understood as a means of sustaining bare animal existence, thus represents the alienation and externalisation of labour, measured against the human species and its capacity for beauty. This determination of human self-activity, of free activity, is what we shall, in order to avoid the misunderstandings associated with the term praxis, continue to call self-realising labour. Self-realising labour is the self-affirmation of the human species-being, in which human beings encounter themselves in nature, in contrast to instrumental labour which, in its externalisation and alienation, functions merely as a means of bare physical existence or of any other end. The thesis that in self-realising labour human beings encounter themselves in nature is constitutive of Marxism itself, for it distinguishes Marxism both from pre-critical, contemplative materialism, in which the human being appears merely as a creature of nature, and from absolute idealism, in which nature is reduced to nothingness, to the otherness of the Idea, and human beings mediate its abolition through knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

Her critique of scientific-technological humanism shows that the problem lies not only in the distortion of the socialist project through administrative rigidity or party control, but also in the very assumption that technical development and the rationalisation of society automatically signify progress. In this context, she exposes the ideology of progress as a form of self-legitimation of modern society. The growth of productivity, the development of technology, and the expansion of scientific rationality are presented as evidence of historical advancement, even though they may simultaneously deepen the division of labour, the instrumentalization of human beings, and the processes of alienation. In this way, Despot calls into question the modern equation according to which the rationalisation of the world necessarily leads to an expansion of freedom. The positivist faith in science, which she criticises, functions as a guarantee of this model of progress, since science appears as a supposedly neutral arbiter of development, while technology becomes its most efficient instrument. However, if science and technology are already embedded within existing relations of

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<sup>21</sup> Id., 26.

power and production, their development does not represent a transcendence of the existing order, but rather its subtle reproduction.

“It is therefore essential to distinguish between the absolute science of labour and the positive science of labour, between technology as a modality of being and technology as a hypostasised instrument for the realisation of the idea of capital. If this distinction is not carefully maintained, the concept of technical humanism becomes indistinguishable from scientific-technological humanism, where technology appears as the most efficient means ‘for humanity,’ in the sense that humaneness is reduced to the accumulation of human needs. From such an understanding, any fundamental revolution or transformation becomes impossible, and the present world indeed appears as ‘the best of all possible worlds,’ thereby confirming a Hegelian positivism that recognises only what is positive in labour. Subsequent attempts to retouch the scientific-technological order with rhetorical appeals to humanity are ideological in the strict sense and ultimately ineffective, since they fail to understand either what is at stake or how it operates. The earlier distinction between self-realising labour and instrumental labour, between technology as a modality of being and technology as the most efficient instrument within the world of labour, as developed in the chapter ‘Marx’s Conception of the Human Being,’ points toward a further distinction between philosophical-technical humanism and scientific-technological humanism.”<sup>22</sup>

It is precisely here that Despot remains in dialogue with the Praxis critique of technocracy, while at the same time extending its scope. Progress can no longer be understood as quantitative growth or as an objective law of history, but rather as a problematic category that calls for a reconsideration of its own criteria. Progress, therefore, is not what a society claims about itself on the basis of technological achievements, but what is measured by the extent to which alienation is overcome and space is opened for free and self-conscious praxis. History, in turn, is nothing other than the act of *humanity’s self-creation and self-emergence*.<sup>23</sup>

In her 1975 book *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije* (*The Ideology of Productive Forces and the Productive Force of Ideology*),<sup>24</sup> Blaženka Despot deepens her earlier critique of technocratic socialism. Whereas in *Humanitet tehničkog društva* she criticised the ideology of technological progress within modern society, in *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga* she develops this critique further by analysing the Marxist category of productive forces itself, showing how it too can be transformed into an ideological presupposi-

<sup>22</sup> Id., pp. 117–118.

<sup>23</sup> Id., p. 147.

<sup>24</sup> Blaženka Despot, *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije* (Osijek: Glas Slavonije, 1976), p. 85.

tion of a productivist understanding of social development. By criticising the “metaphysical priority” of productive forces over relations of production, she rejects the deterministic understanding of social development. Instead, she seeks to redefine productive forces as a social relation of “real appropriation” among human beings, labour, and the means of labour. In this way, progress ceases to appear as a neutral category of quantitative growth in production and the rationalisation of labour. The measure of social development is instead shifted toward humanistic criteria, above all the development of the universal individual and the expansion of free time.

“The overcoming of the idiotism of the profession is a historical process through which workers become human beings. Socialism mediates between the class and the classless, between the political and the human, by transforming people into workers and workers into human beings. The abolition of the division of labour, as the condition for overcoming the idiotism of the profession, both confirms that division of labour and negates it through a transformed mode of social production. A transformed mode of social production, on the basis of unchanged means of production and the technological division of labour, is possible only through a transformed productive capacity of the human being as worker. Workers are not granted freedom from the determinants of the productive forces or from the industrial mode of production. Yet within the framework of socialist self-management, freedom emerges through social ownership of the means of production, through the association of labour, and through self-management in decisions concerning social production and reproduction. In the bourgeois industrial mode of production, the absence of ‘job satisfaction’ shifts attention from the worker’s interests as producer to those of the consumer, thereby securing ‘progress.’ By contrast, the self-management framework creates the possibility that, even within conditions of alienation, the worker may find satisfaction in participation in decision-making, that is, as a producer. Freedom is thus given within a political framework, which provides the real horizon for Garady’s claim that ‘it is not enough to show that the existing form of labour is unacceptable; it must also be shown that it is possible to invent another order between what is presently achievable and what is now mockingly real’”.<sup>25</sup>

A key theoretical shift introduced by Despot lies in her distinction between the *ideology of productive forces* and the *productive force of ideology*. By the “ideology of productive forces”, Despot refers to the conception she criticises, one that naturalises existing forms of social development and presents them as inherently progressive. Such a view, she argues, transforms the category of productive forces into an ideological justification of existing industrial development, since social progress becomes equated with the quantitative expansion

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<sup>25</sup> Despot, *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije*, p. 85.

of production and the rationalisation of labour. By contrast, the notion of the “productive force of ideology” designates the active role of consciousness and self-consciousness of social subjects in the historical process. Ideology is no longer understood merely as a reflection of economic relations or as a legitimising image of the development of production, but as a potential social force capable of directing the development of productive forces and shaping their historical subject. In this sense, progress is an open historical process that depends on the conscious praxis and self-awareness of social actors, above all the working class.

“The articulation of the need for the self-consciousness of the working class, and not merely a simple awareness <...> constitutes the ‘productive power of ideology’: the realisation of philosophy must be carried by the proletariat so that, in historical dilemmas, it remains the subject. In order to do so, the proletariat, as a real empirical subject, must be capable of the ‘philosophisation of reality,’ as well as its ‘re-philosophisation,’ rather than leaving this task to its representatives, ideologues such as political and trade union leaders, philosophers, intellectuals, and others. The ‘philosophisation of reality,’ understood as a decision in favour of a given historical alternative within the orbit of Marxism, can mean nothing other than the politicisation of reality. The notion of the ‘consciousness and self-consciousness of the working class’ thus indicates that politicisation is identical with the self-consciousness of the working class, which represents its true ‘productive force of ideology’.”<sup>26</sup>

At this point, two key elements of Blaženka Despot’s philosophy can already be identified, situating her work within the broader theses on the idea of progress discussed earlier. The first concerns the idea of progress itself, which she shows to be marked by significant difficulties. One of these difficulties lies in the fact that the idea of progress may negate its own essence, since historically it has not always promoted human and social advancement but has at times directly obstructed it. As a legitimising ideology of modern industrial society, progress does not necessarily lead toward a better future; rather, it may serve to petrify the present *ad infinitum*. The second concerns the bearer of the idea of progress, that is, the revolutionary subject of social change, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. As Despot’s philosophy develops, this subject acquires increasingly clear and complex contours. Despot shows not only that simply being human is not in itself a sufficient condition for progress and that the revolutionary subject must be formed, but also, as becomes evident in her later works, that careful attention must be paid to all those who are prevented from undergoing such formation and for whom any

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<sup>26</sup> Id., p. 7.

transformation of the present is therefore effectively denied. In other words, Despot draws attention to the existence of those who remain silenced, neglected, or invisible, those to whom history has long been denied and who are thereby deprived of any influence over the future. In this sense, their exclusion constitutes a fundamental obstacle to progress itself.

In her 1987 book *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* (*The Woman Question and Socialist Self-Management*),<sup>27</sup> Despot does not abandon the idea of progress, nor does she reject the Hegelian-Marxist assumption that history can be understood as an emancipatory process of the realisation of freedom. She continues to operate within a horizon in which history is more than a mere sequence of events; it is a structure of mediation, a movement of advancement in the consciousness of freedom. However, her intervention is no longer directed at the technocratic reduction of progress (as in *Humanitet tehničkog društva*), nor solely at the ideological blockage of class subjectivation (as in *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga*), but rather at the universal presupposition of this very advancement. At the same time, this is the book in which a fundamental reorientation of her thought takes place, shifting the focus from the process itself to its bearer, the subject of revolutionary transformation.

“The first characteristic of spirit is the substance of spirit. That substance is freedom, or the only truth of spirit as freedom. For that reason, Hegel’s philosophy is a philosophy of freedom. World history can be nothing other than a constant mediation in freedom; world history is above all progress in the consciousness of freedom. What is at issue is that spirit is *Bei sich selbst sein*; spirit is only with itself, and therefore its first characteristic is that it is free, for everything else that exists stands in relation to something and depends on something, and precisely because it depends on something it is essentially unfree. Only that which does not relate to anything remains with itself and is absolutely free. That spirit which is ‘*Bei sich selbst sein*’, precisely because it is constantly with itself and relates only to itself, is absolutely free, and therefore world history will be progress in the consciousness of freedom. For history is rational precisely because the substantiality of reason is historically mediated in such a way that the stages of history (to put it bluntly, in Marxist terms) differ according to progress in the consciousness of freedom. Thus, Hegel will consider the state of nature essentially unfree, because in it no one has a consciousness of freedom, and without the consciousness of freedom there is no freedom itself.”<sup>28</sup>

Starting from a critique of Hegel, Despot argues that the historical “progress in the consciousness of freedom” is constructed through a hierarchy of the universal and the particular. Freedom is realised through the state, law, labour,

<sup>27</sup> Blaženka Despot, *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* (Zagreb: Cekade, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Id., 10.

and civil society, yet these are precisely the spheres in which certain subjectivities are mediated as secondary or derivative.

“Accordingly, the individual cannot in any way be free prior to the state; rather, the individual can only be free within the state, simply because the state is that objective truth and objective spirit. In other words, one will be free insofar as one obeys the laws. The individual will, as a subjective determination, is arbitrariness and therefore irrational, whereas the universal will, the rational one, resides in the state. The individual is free only when he obeys the state (and ‘the leadership,’ as we might say today; Hegel would say the bureaucrats). Free will is only that will which knows what it wants. Through the absolute method a distinction is established between the subjective will as subjectivism or arbitrariness and the rational will which mediates history to us precisely as rational and as freedom.”<sup>29</sup>

By analysing the Hegelian-Marxist conception of history as progress in the consciousness of freedom, Despot shows that the universal subject of this progress is constituted through a specific social structure that presupposes a sexual differentiation of social roles. Progress, as it appears in the classical tradition of the philosophy of freedom, rests on a hierarchy between the universal sphere of the state, law, and labour, and the particular sphere of the family and reproduction, whereby access to universality is implicitly tied to the male subject.

“In Hegel, such a distinction does not arise from contingency, but precisely from freedom itself. This freedom consists in the fact that the natural differences between man and woman persist within the spiritual determination of marriage and the family, because ethical substantiality, as a concept, has split within itself into the spiritual and the material. Accordingly, the fact that the man has one role and the woman another, that the man assumes the spiritual role as the active one, which stands in relation to the state and thus to freedom, while the woman occupies the natural or material or passive role, since her function lies in piety, is presented as a necessity of ethical life, that is, of this necessary mediation of freedom.”<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the feminist critique does not reject the emancipatory horizon of history, but rather shows that its universality is historically and socially mediated. In this way, progress ceases to appear as a pre-given and neutral universality and instead becomes an open and conflictual horizon of emancipation in which the very structure of universality itself is called into question.

In this sense, Despot’s thought can be situated within a broader historical transformation of the concept of progress. In the earlier phase of her work, she rejects the identification of progress with technological development and the

<sup>29</sup> Id., 12.

<sup>30</sup> Id., pp. 20–21.

growth of productive forces, showing that not even class position guarantees revolutionary subjectivation. Progress thus ceases to appear as a law of history and instead becomes a politically conditioned possibility. In the feminist phase of her thought, this shift is further deepened: the problem is not only that progress lacks a guaranteed bearer, but also that its universality was, from the outset, falsely neutral. If historical advancement itself has been structured through a hierarchy that positions women outside the sphere of historical subjectivity, then progress was never truly universal.

### *The Revolutionary Subject in Blaženka Despot*

“Drawing primarily on Marx’s early writings as ‘humanist,’ particularly the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx, 1967b), Marxist humanism positions itself in opposition to the ‘objectivist’ and positivist tendencies in the humanities and social theory. According to this Marxist tradition, such tendencies are most clearly reflected in orthodox interpretations of historical materialism, the so-called Diamat. These deviations of Marxism are primarily located in the Stalinist variant of Marxism, which bypasses the revolutionary role of the subject in historical processes and instead focuses on abstract ‘laws of history’ (Sher, 1977: 61–62). The central concern of Marxist humanists, indeed the key emphasis of their theoretical starting point, is expressed in the formula of the unity of theory and praxis, at the centre of which stands the revolutionary subject and the possibility of overcoming its alienation.”<sup>31</sup>

In the philosophy of Blaženka Despot, the question of the (revolutionary) subject occupies a central place, and its transformation can be traced through the key works mentioned earlier. Her specific philosophical views on this issue placed her firmly within the Praxis tradition, yet over time they also led her away from it. At the core of her work lies a seemingly simple question: what makes human beings agents of social change?

The very fact that Despot poses this question, as Ankica Čakardić has suggested, positions her philosophy outside teleological conceptions of history and progress, since such conceptions are not overly concerned with the “blind cogs” within an inevitable historical process. In other words, from a teleological perspective, it ultimately makes little difference what qualities people possess: progress unfolds regardless of whether they are prepared for it, whether they choose it, or not.

Despot begins from the opposite position, one that defines her not only intellectually as a member of the Praxis tradition, but also disciplinarily as a

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<sup>31</sup> Ankica Čakardić, *Dionizijski socijalizam* (forthcoming publication), manuscript, p. 132.

sociologist, bringing a heightened sensitivity to concrete social relations and their dynamics. If progress is to occur, those who carry it forward must possess the qualities that qualify them as its agents. Mere existence in some kind of historical observation post is not a sufficient precondition for a better future. The future requires more than that: it requires those who will choose it (since not everyone does), those who will desire it, those who will actively and practically work toward it, and those who, through their willingness to dismantle existing structures, will build new ones.

Despite the Praxis claim that the need to transcend one's existing reality is an inherent and essentially human characteristic, Despot justifiably aligns herself with thinkers who seek to identify the social obstacles that prevent these essential capacities from being realised in their fullness. Progress therefore presupposes, in a strongly Hegelian sense, the progress of human beings themselves and of their consciousness of themselves; the one is simply impossible without the other.

In this context, overcoming alienation becomes one of the central aims, referring to the process of abolishing social relations that separate human beings from their own social essence. It is therefore not merely an economic liberation of labour but, especially in Despot's later works, a broader process of humanity's historical self-mediation through conscious social praxis.

In *Humanitet tehničkog društva*, the bearer of progress is implicitly presupposed within the humanist horizon of the Praxis tradition. Progress is defined as the realisation of humanity through the overcoming of alienated labour, while the subject capable of carrying this transformation is not sociologically elaborated but ontologically grounded in the concept of labour as a generic human practice. Although Despot rejects the vulgar-Marxist identification of progress with the growth of productive forces, its subject remains relatively stable: it is the working human being, implicitly the working class, as the bearer of the possibility of realising humanity.

“The concept of the proletariat was formulated as the antithesis of instrumental labour, namely as an empirical force which, by producing a world against itself, can also produce a reversal, a revolution. The demand for the abolition of private property is a demand for the abolition of externalised labour, the emancipation of the human being as a truly human being. The struggle of the working class is thus directed toward a transformation of labour from instrumental labour into self-realising labour.”<sup>32</sup>

In *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije*, this assumption is called into question. Through her analysis of the so-called wildcat

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<sup>32</sup> Despot, *Humanitet tehničkog društva*, p. 45.

strikes in September 1969 in the Federal Republic of Germany, Despot observes a significant fact: the conflict and discontent of the rebelling working class are not accompanied by revolutionary self-consciousness, that is, by the capacity of the working class to understand its own economic deprivation as a structural form of alienation and to recognise itself as a political subject capable of transforming these relations. In other words, revolutionary self-consciousness is not merely a consciousness of interest (in the sense of recognising one's economic interests and understanding one's exploitation), but also a reflexive understanding of one's historical role, namely the role of overturning existing structures. By distinguishing between consciousness and self-consciousness of the working class, Despot demonstrates that an objective position within production does not guarantee an emancipatory role. The working class may be integrated, depoliticised, or limited to the immediate experience of economic interests. It therefore ceases to function automatically as the bearer of progress. Progress depends instead on the degree of self-conscious politicisation, that is, on the capacity to understand one's own situation as a historical and political problem. The subject of progress thus ceases to be an ontological presupposition and becomes a politically conditioned possibility.

“In the contemporary ‘affluent society,’ where the masked irrationality of reality and the alienation of labour persist (despite the absence of the pauperisation of the working class, the extension of the working day, and similar phenomena), consciousness of one's own position as the consciousness of immediate experience is insufficient in relation to the compactness of reality. From such mere consciousness <...> there follows not the realisation of philosophy, but reconciliation with the status quo. Self-conscious being, understood as consciousness of the consciousness of labour and of the class that carries it out, is the presupposition of the realisation of rational reality.”<sup>33</sup>

For Blaženka Despot, the working class is not a revolutionary subject in itself, nor by virtue of its objective position in the relations of production; rather, it becomes one only through the development of self-consciousness, that is, through the capacity to “philosophize reality” and to politicize it – understanding reality and engaging in political action capable of transforming it. Revolution, therefore, cannot be reduced to a spontaneous effect of economic contradictions, but requires a subject capable of reflecting on its own position, historical alternatives, and its responsibility for choosing among them.

“In analysing the needs of a self-managing society, the fundamental need that emerges is the need for education and for overcoming the ‘class-bound idiotism of the profession.’ A new form of socialist material and spiritual culture requires

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<sup>33</sup> Despot, *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije*, p. 11.

not merely consciousness of the situation, but consciousness of consciousness, that is, self-consciousness, just as self-consciousness is also the presupposition of the revolutionary movement of the working class in the West ('Consciousness and Self-Consciousness of the Working Class'). The articulation of the need for the self-consciousness of the working class, and not merely a simple consciousness of <...>, constitutes the 'productive power of ideology': it ensures that the realisation of philosophy is carried by the proletariat and that, in historical dilemmas, it remains the subject. In order to do so, as a real empirical subject it must be capable of the 'philosophisation of reality,' as well as its 're-philosophisation,' rather than leaving this task to its representatives or ideologues: political and trade union leaders, philosophers, intellectuals, and so on. The 'philosophisation of reality' understood as a decision in favour of a given historical alternative within the orbit of Marxism, can mean nothing other than the politicisation of *reality*. The text 'Consciousness and Self-Consciousness of the Working Class,' as well as the manuscript as a whole, indicates that politicisation is identical with the self-consciousness of the working class, which represents its true 'productive force of ideology.' For the self-consciousness of the working class to become the 'productive force of ideology' in the sense of a revolutionary reversal, a fundamental transformation of the class content of culture is required, together with a revaluation of the concept of culture. In the sphere of ideology, the abstract negation of the national in the name of the class, as an abstract universal, must be overcome through a self-conscious understanding of the relation between the national and the class as a concrete universal ('The Class and the National in the Horizon of Culture and Civilisation'). The importance of the productive force of ideology in this context is particularly significant in our multinational community."<sup>34</sup>

Blaženka Despot emphasises education and overcoming specialist alienation, understood as a consequence of the "idiotism of the profession," as key preconditions for the development of the self-consciousness of the working class and its revolutionary practice. At the same time, she rejects the idea that such consciousness can be delegated to ideologues, party leaders, or intellectuals, in short, to elites. The "idiotism of the profession" denotes a condition in which the division of labour and professional specialisation narrow human consciousness to a single occupational function and thereby prevent an understanding of the social whole.

The revolutionary subject must therefore be the real, empirical proletariat that produces its own self-consciousness, since only in this way can ideology become a "productive force" of social transformation. Yet it is precisely in the absence of such self-consciousness that Despot identifies the source of the inertia of contemporary society and its reconciliation with the status quo. For

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<sup>34</sup> Id., p. 7.

this reason, she later broadens the concept of the revolutionary subject to include new social movements, particularly the feminist movement, which calls into question the deeper civilisational matrix of the will to power and thereby opens the possibility of a more radical form of emancipation – one that is not merely class-based but genuinely human.

A comparison between Despot's understanding of the revolutionary subject and the positions of other authors associated with the philosophy of praxis allows for a more precise delineation of the ontological and socio-historical assumptions underlying their respective conceptions of practice and emancipation. In relation to the dominant theoretical emphases within this circle, Despot's understanding of the revolutionary subject shifts the focus toward more concretely situated social relations and the historically specific conditions of subject formation, a perspective that partly reflects her sociologically informed approach. While the philosophy of praxis tends to conceive the revolutionary subject primarily within the ontological horizon of praxis, as the possibility of free and self-active activity constituted in the act of negating the existing order, Despot insists that the subject of revolution must assume an empirically recognisable and socially determinate form. She perceptively recognises that, although the working class occupies a position from which it could become the bearer of social transformation, there exist real social and historical obstacles that prevent the development of its revolutionary self-consciousness. Indeed, there are numerous reasons why those who would seem to have the greatest stake in transforming their own conditions of existence nevertheless fail to do so, instead passively enduring, and, at times, even actively supporting the very conditions in which they fundamentally suffer.

The question of the bearer of progress appears in Blaženka Despot's work as a central point of both her theoretical break with the philosophy of modernity and her divergence from the Praxis thinkers themselves. In modern thought, the bearer of social progress was most often conceived as a relatively narrow, socially privileged subject, whether as the rational individual of the Enlightenment, the educated citizen of liberal society, or a historically conscious political elite embodying the advancement of reason and civilisation. Such a conception of progress rested on the assumption that social change is led by a minority endowed with knowledge, political power, or cultural capital.

With Marx, however, a significant shift occurs: the subject of historical progress is no longer an elite but the proletariat, a class whose position within the relations of production enables the radical negation of the existing social order and the establishment of emancipated social relations. Yet later theoretical debates, among which Blaženka Despot's contribution is particularly significant,

reveal that even the working class cannot automatically assume this role, since the development of revolutionary praxis depends on complex social conditions and on the development of self-consciousness. For this reason, in her later works – one of which is discussed in the following section – Despot returns to the question of the subject of progress. In these works, the emphasis shifts away from a single bearer of progress toward different forms of oppression, and toward the need to rethink emancipatory potential from the perspective of gender relations, thereby significantly expanding the traditional Marxist horizon of the revolutionary subject.

It is precisely within this theoretical framework that her book *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* should be read. In this work, Despot demonstrates that traditional theories of social progress, including Marxist conceptions of the revolutionary subject, often remain blind to the specific forms of oppression arising from gender relations. The woman question is therefore not treated as a separate social problem, but as a key test of the universality of modern emancipatory projects. Through an analysis of the position of women in modern society, Despot seeks to show how the limits of existing theories of progress and revolutionary praxis become visible precisely at this point. In doing so, the question of the subject of emancipation becomes further radicalised: instead of a single bearer of social change, the need emerges for a theory of emancipation capable of addressing multiple forms of social oppression and their interrelations.

Drawing on the Marxist tradition while also critically engaging with its limitations, Despot argues that the emancipation of women cannot be understood as a secondary or derivative issue within the broader framework of class struggle, but rather as a constitutive problem of the theory of emancipation itself. Classical theories of emancipation often structure the process of liberation hierarchically: the universal emancipatory subject is identified with the working class, while the woman question is treated as a particular issue that will supposedly be resolved through the abolition of class relations. As a result, women's emancipation is not conceptualised as an autonomous theoretical and political problem but rather as the outcome of a process defined outside their specific social position. Despot reveals that such a logic produces the persistent invisibility of women as historical subjects. Since the proletariat is conceived as the universal bearer of emancipation, internal hierarchies within it are erased, while gender inequality remains theoretically unaddressed. Women thus appear as “proletarians among proletarians”: included within the class relation yet excluded from its historical subjectivity. Their emancipation consequently becomes dependent on a process defined without them.

“Only through such a problematisation, and through the socialist self-management founded upon it as an alternative social order, does the problem of the emancipation of women appear as particularly important for reducing the human world and human relations to the human being itself. Because of the real, empirical position of women within the social division of labour, an enormous revolutionary potential for human emancipation lies within them. Yet the path is a long one, since the subsumption of women under the concept of the ‘worker’ equally obscures both the human essence of the worker and the human essence of woman. For ‘everything natural must come into being; thus, the human being (woman) also has her own act of becoming, which as an act of becoming consciously abolishes itself’”.<sup>35</sup>

The above-mentioned derivation is not accidental; its foundation lies primarily in the ontological limitation of the concept of the human to a single sex. In its sharpened form, it ultimately becomes irrelevant whether the supposed human authors of the future are scientists, politicians, or proletarians. Women are not among them.

“Abstract political emancipation, which prevents the human being from becoming a generic being in their empirical life, in their individual labour and in their individual relations, and which is grounded in an ahistorical conception of nature, understands the human being abstractly as a citizen. The abstract character of the concept of ‘man,’ detached from its historical emergence in relation to nature, is also revealed in the very abstraction of the concept of ‘man’ itself, within which sex does not exist. ‘Man’ is both male and female; yet when the concept of ‘man’ is invoked, a metaphysical and religious reduction of the sexes to the concept of ‘man’ has already taken place. In that concept it is already presupposed that the man is the human being, whereas the fact that woman is also included must be explicitly emphasised in speech in order to be understood.”<sup>36</sup>

As in her earlier books, Blaženka Despot insists here that the question of human freedom cannot be considered apart from an analysis of the way labour is organised in modern society, where the social division of labour represents one of the key sites for the reproduction of gender inequality. The position of women in modern society is marked by a specific form of marginalisation that arises from both their concentration in particular segments of labour and their historical association with reproductive labour and the sphere of the family. Historical progress in the consciousness of freedom has been constructed from the perspective of the male subject, while women are situated within the sphere of nature, family, and sentiment, outside the space in which freedom

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<sup>35</sup> Despot, *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje*, p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Id., p. 52.

is historically realised. The restriction of women to the role of an “ahistorical child-bearer,” who only in marriage acquires her substantial determination, entails their exclusion from the substantial life of the state, science, and the public sphere. The man, who possesses substantial life in the state and in the struggle with the world and with himself, embodies the modern sensibility and the right to particularity, while the woman remains tied to reproduction and the private sphere. Women thus participate in the historical process, but not as bearers of its rationality; rather, they appear as an element of its “dark residue,” as a natural condition for the reproduction of society. In this way, the universality of the modern concept of progress reveals itself as partial.

“The restriction of woman to an ahistorical child-bearer, who only in marriage acquires her substantial determination, essentially limits her to turning toward herself and into herself as her own object, and thereby to possessing the right of “particularity,” that is, to willing love as a relation between two consciousnesses that do not struggle with one another but affirm each other and produce life. From the inner side, within her limited world and limited education, education which is the presupposition for overcoming mere sexuality, as essentially unfree, woman cannot produce the infinity of the particular person, the individual, which is precisely modernity. From the outer side, the right to her own happiness and to the meaning of her own life is denied to her, while the assurance that she exists at all is secured for her only through marriage within the framework of law. The man, who has substantial life in the state, in science, and in the struggle with the world and with himself (turning toward himself and into himself), thereby realises the modern sensibility, the right to particularity and to one’s own happiness.”<sup>37</sup>

It is precisely this empirical position of women within the social division of labour that enables Despot to demonstrate that the woman question is not merely a matter of legal or political equality, but one that reaches deeply into the very structure of modern society. In this respect, though not explicitly, she aligns herself with the feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir and with the broader second wave of feminist thought. Although they begin from very different philosophical traditions, they share a critique of the supposed “naturalness” of women’s position and of the universal concept of “man”, as well as the conviction that the woman question must be treated as a philosophical problem. Despot’s reflections on the fateful and decisive placement and definition of femininity exclusively within the intimate sphere of the family, which remains a sphere of labour even though unpaid, simultaneously suggest that the woman question must be approached precisely through this sphere.

In this way, Despot calls into question the idea of the proletariat as a unified and self-sufficient subject of history. The shift from the proletariat to women

<sup>37</sup> Despot, *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje*, p. 35.

is not merely a change of focus but a radical critique of the very structure of universality itself. The bearer of progress can no longer be conceived as a genderless, abstract subject, since such a figure reproduces the patriarchal hierarchy of the universal and the particular. Ultimately, in Despot's work, both the understanding of the bearer of progress and the structure of the concept itself undergo transformation. From the working class as a potential universal subject, the focus moves toward plural, politically articulated subjects who, through self-consciousness and struggle, acquire the right to historical authorship.

These subjects that come into focus in her later books, *Emancipacija i novi socijalni pokreti* (1989) and *New Age i Moderna* (1995), in which Blaženka Despot once again raises the question of the bearers of social progress under the conditions during and after the collapse of socialism, now from the perspective of a deep crisis of modern emancipatory projects. In this context, she no longer begins from the premise of a single revolutionary subject such as the proletariat, but instead seeks potential agents of emancipation among those social groups that have been systematically marginalised in modern society and whose experiences reveal the limits of the universalist projects of modernity, above all social movements.

“A defining characteristic of the new social movements is the revaluation of the concept of freedom and emancipation. As social movements, the new social movements understand themselves as emancipatory precisely because they are directed against the will to power. They are directed against the state, institutions, the establishment, reification, possession, violence, war, sexism, and the destructive and violent relation toward nature. Since the new social movements are directed against the will to power, whether individual or collective, and since that will constitutes the foundation of Western European culture, they necessarily encounter the reluctance of the establishment toward them, both in the East and in the West. In the West, within bourgeois ‘particular democracy,’ they find their space, but as a challenge to and a questioning of the limits of political emancipation and political parties. In the East, where all spheres of interest are driven into particularities that derive their meaning from generality, they are excluded, banned, and suppressed, and regarded as imports from the West. <...> Neofeminism is a new social movement, but it also goes beyond the new social movements.

The analysis and critique of patriarchy as the basis of women's inequality, characteristic of feminism from its very beginnings, arrives at patriarchy as the cultural and civilisational axis of the will to power. Patriarchy historically emerged together with private property, the monogamous family, and the state. The will to power, violence against nature, against class, against another human being, and against women constitutes the axis of the culture in which we live. To

touch this foundation means to create a crisis. Yet feminists, like the other new social movements, do not create the crisis; they are the expression of the crisis.”<sup>38</sup>

Alongside women, Despot also devotes particular attention to ecological movements and ecological consciousness. She finds the motivation for this in the fact that ecological movements call into question the very civilisational logic of modern society, especially its instrumental rationality and the unlimited expansion of techno-economic development. While classical theories of progress assumed that the development of the productive forces would automatically lead to greater freedom, the ecological crisis demonstrates that such a logic may instead generate new forms of domination, including the destruction of the natural conditions of life.

In this sense, Despot identifies a certain structural affinity between the woman question and the ecological question. Both reveal the hidden assumptions of the modern concept of progress: domination over nature, as well as over those social groups historically associated with nature or with the reproduction of life. For this reason, women and ecological movements become, for Despot, important indicators of new emancipatory potentials in the aftermath of the crisis of the socialist project. They do not represent a new “universal subject” of history but rather sites in which a critique of the modern project of domination over nature, society, and human beings themselves can emerge. In other words, in her later works, Despot shifts the focus from the classical revolutionary subject toward plural forms of emancipatory action. The potential of progress is no longer tied to a single social class but to movements and experiences that expose the limits of the modern project and open space for a different understanding of freedom and social development.

The future is not produced through the realisation of a predetermined universality, but through the articulation of those who have historically been excluded from it. Progress thus becomes transformed from a linear dynamic carried by a privileged actor into an open process in which the subject of emancipation is constituted through the contestation of exclusion. In Despot’s work, one can therefore trace the full arc of the transformation of the concept of progress: from a critique of the teleological assumptions of modern theories of progress, through an emphasis on the political and socio-historical conditions of emancipation, to a critique of the false universality of the concept of “man.” The bearer of progress is no longer given in advance but emerges through reflection on concrete forms of domination and through struggles for inclusion in the very definition of freedom.

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<sup>38</sup> Blaženka Despot, *Emancipacija i novi socijalni pokreti* (Zagreb: Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo, 1989), pp. 13–14.

## Conclusion

The historical transformation of the concept of progress, especially after the catastrophes of the twentieth century, led to a profound distrust of teleological philosophies of history. Whereas in classical modernity progress signified the rational and necessary advancement of humanity toward freedom, the experiences of totalitarianism, world wars, and industrialised violence revealed that technological and scientific development does not guarantee moral or political improvement. In this context, Walter Benjamin exposes progress as the perspective of the “victors of history,” while Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer demonstrate how Enlightenment rationality may take the form of domination and regression. Progress thus begins to be understood not as an unquestioned emancipatory dynamic but as an ideological narrative that legitimises existing structures of power.

Despot's thought emerges precisely within this critical space. Unlike radical rejections of progress, she does not abandon the emancipatory horizon but seeks to free it from its metaphysical and determinist assumptions. In *Humanitet tehničkog društva*, progress is no longer synonymous with technological advancement; in *Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije*, it is no longer guaranteed by class position; and in *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje*, it is no longer universal in a gender-neutral sense. In this way, Despot completes the process of deconstructing the modern model of progress: first destabilising its objectivist foundation, then its class-based certainty, and finally its supposed neutral universality.

In the feminist phase of her thought, this transformation becomes most radical. If Benjamin showed that progress erases the experience of the oppressed, and Adorno that rationality can reproduce domination, Despot demonstrates that the very subject of progress is gender-coded. The historical “advance in the consciousness of freedom” has never been neutral but structured through a hierarchy of the universal and the particular in which the woman question was systematically postponed. In this sense, Despot anticipates contemporary feminist and postcolonial critiques of developmental metanarratives: progress is not false because it is impossible, but because it is historically partial, or more precisely, because its partiality renders it impossible as a truly universal concept. Yet, unlike postmodern rejections of grand narratives, Despot does not abandon the idea of social transformation. She preserves the normative core of progress, the conviction that the transformation of intolerable conditions of life is necessary, while stripping it of its teleological and determinist assumptions. Progress thus ceases to be a guaranteed outcome of history and becomes an open, conflictual process without a predetermined subject and without a certain end.

In this sense, Despot participates in a broader philosophical transformation of the concept of progress: from rational necessity to political contingency, from a single historical subject to plural forms of subjectivation, and from universalist certainty to a normatively open horizon of emancipation. It is precisely in this tension between the critique of modern universalism and the retention of an emancipatory horizon that the distinctive place of Blaženka Despot's philosophy can be located.

### Dekonstrukcija univerzalnog subjekta: Progres i autori budućnosti u odabranim radovima Blaženke Despot

#### *Sažetak*

Članak razmatra pojam »autorstva budućnosti« u filozofiji Blaženke Despot u kontekstu krize moderne ideje progressa i njezina subjekta. Polazeći od Despotine kritike teleoloških koncepcija povijesti i privilegiranih nositelja društvene promjene, pokazuje se da ona pojam progressa premješta iz sfere povijesne nužnosti u područje politički otvorene i kontingentne društvene prakse. U okviru tradicije filozofije prakse Despot razvija shvaćanje revolucionarnog subjekta koji ne proizlazi automatski iz objektivnog klasnog položaja, nego iz razvoja samosvijesti, obrazovanja i sposobnosti refleksije konkretnih povijesnih odnosa. Posebna pozornost posvećena je njezinoj feminističkoj kritici marksističkog univerzalizma, u kojoj pokazuje da je pretpostavljeni subjekt emancipacije rodno obilježen te da hijerarhijska struktura emancipacijskih teorija sustavno proizvodi nevidljivost žena kao povijesnih aktera. Rad nastoji pokazati da Despot time ne samo proširuje subjekt društvene promjene nego i preispituje sam pojam povijesnog autorstva i njegove pretpostavke.

*Ključne riječi:* Blaženka Despot, progres, revolucionarni subjekt, filozofija prakse, marksistički feminizam, žensko pitanje; autorstvo budućnosti