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THE PROGRESSIVE UTILIZATION THEORY (PROUT): ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC AND SPIRITUAL MODEL FOR THE WELFARE OF ALL

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To envision our future, it is vitally important to ask: what kind of world do we want? Prout (the Progressive Utilization Theory) is a socioeconomic alternative model that promotes the welfare and development of every person, physically, mentally, and spiritually. This article provides a brief introduction to some of the economic and social concepts of Prout, including guaranteeing minimum necessities to all, the right to jobs, a three-tiered economy, including small-scale private enterprises, cooperatives, and large-scale publicly owned key industries, food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture, proper utilization of natural and human resources, and economic democracy. Prout promotes an ecological and spiritual perspective that is universal and nondogmatic. Prout's holistic model provides an overarching framework to effectively measure and compare policies for the greater good of all people, as well as the planet.

"Another world is possible!" is the theme of the World Social Forum, which began in Brazil in 2001, and which has been growing exponentially ever since, with hundreds of thousands participating in global, regional, national, and local events that democratically educate people and rally to create social, political, and economic changes. At these forums, it is common to proclaim that we are against the unjust global economy, based on profit, selfishness, and greed, which excludes more people than it benefits. However, the Progressive Utilization Theory, Prout, offers the opportunity to champion what we are for and explore how we can achieve our goals.

When audiences are asked, "What kind of world do you want?" in the Philippines, Poland, the United States, Brazil, or the slums of Caracas, the answers are almost invariably the same: a world without war, hunger, or poverty, with human rights, democracy, environmental protection, etc. The truth is we all want the same thing: peace and justice on earth! There is tremendous power in this shared dream, and there are many people who are struggling to help create it.

We believe that the process of answering this question, envisioning what kind of society we want, is so fundamental to creating a better future that students should be asked it in every school from the first year to postgraduate level, plus the society as a whole.

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Indian philosopher Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921–1990), author, composer and spiritual master, devoted his life to exploring and answering this question in the most practical way possible. He first formulated Prout in 1959, and formed an organization called Proutist Universal to work to implement it. From 1971 to 1978, he was a political prisoner in India due to Prout's stand against corruption, the caste system, the exploitation of women, and political exploitation.

Prout promotes economic self-reliance, cooperatives, environmental balance, and universal spiritual values. The essential characteristic of Prout is economic liberation, freeing human beings from mundane problems so that all will have increasing opportunities for intellectual and spiritual liberation. Prout is not a rigid mold to be imposed on any society. On the contrary, it is a holistic set of dynamic concepts that can be applied appropriately by citizens and leaders to help their region or country prosper and achieve self-reliance in an ecological way.

We provide a brief introduction to some of the economic and social concepts of Prout below, and explain the importance of its nondogmatic ecological and spiritual perspective.

Minimum Necessities

People in all nations must have their minimum necessities met in order to be productive and develop their full potentials. The five minimum necessities are: food (including pure drinking water), clothing, housing (including adequate sanitation, energy, communication, and information), medical care, and education. These must be provided in a sustainable manner so that future generations can also meet their minimum necessities. The Brazilian spiritual activist Frei Betto called attention to this need when he said, "The degree of justice in a society can be evaluated by the way food is distributed amongst all of the citizens" (F. Betto, letter to the author, Dada Maheshvarananda, 2002).

The right to meaningful employment with fair wages is also a fundamental human right, because it ensures an adequate income to purchase the above basic necessities. Prout recommends using cooperatives to sustainably produce the minimum necessities as well as other goods and services.

Physical Wealth

Prout's solution to economic inequality is based on the obvious truth that the world's physical resources are limited. When certain individuals accumulate too much, there is not enough for everyone else. We have to make decisions about how wealth is distributed, how our economy is organized, which resources we will use, and which resources we will leave for future generations.

If our goal is to create a fair society that meets everyone's minimum necessities both now and in the future, we need to develop distribution methods to achieve that goal. Allowing one person or a small group of people to hoard resources, including wealth, is counterproductive.

National and state governments need to determine how much wealth one person can own and how much of that wealth can be passed from one generation to the next. These laws should be evaluated and adjusted so that they foster a fair distribution and provide economic opportunities throughout society.

National governments should also promote self-supporting decentralized local economies and full employment, with transparent economic opportunities that discourage law breaking and encourage fair salary structures.

Sarkar proposed a three-tier system of enterprise management to create a healthy economy: privately owned small-scale enterprises, worker-owned cooperatives, and state-owned public utilities.

Small-scale private enterprises can produce nonessential or luxury goods and services. They are a vital component of an economy, because they encourage creativity and personal initiative. They allow individuals, families, and small partnerships to develop innovations, as well as identify and fulfill needs that benefit their communities and themselves.

Prout recommends that a ceiling be set on sales volume and number of employees for private enterprises, in order to prevent unlimited concentration of wealth in the hands of one person, which would be to the detriment of the community. If a firm reaches one of those limits, it must then choose whether to transform itself into a cooperatively managed enterprise, to divide itself or to curtail further expansion.

Cooperatives form the second level of a Prout economy: industrial, agricultural, consumer, banks, and services co-ops. It is a basic right of workers to own and manage their enterprises through collective management. These cooperatives can produce the minimum necessities and most other products and services, forming the largest part of a Prout economy. Cooperative banks can invest in local housing, farms, students, and businesses. They can avoid much of the speculation that has contributed to the recent economic hardships felt around the world.

Large-scale key industries, such as transportation, energy, telecommunications and steel, form the third level of a Prout economy. They require large capital investment and are difficult to decentralize. Prout recommends that such key industries should be managed as public utilities, and should never be privatized.

Many economists have suggested that salaries within companies and cooperatives should be tied together to reduce the large wealth discrepancies that we see in many industrialized societies. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, "The most forthright and effective way of enhancing equality within the firm would be to specify the maximum range between average and maximum compensation" (Galbraith 1973).

While some cooperatives choose to evenly share profits among all their members, most choose to simply link their starting salary with their highest salary at a ratio of, for example, three to one. Thus the people with the most seniority or most skilled jobs are paid a certain percentage more than the basic starting wage. Thus salaries in a cooperative might range between $30,000 and $90,000 per year, depending on what the members agreed.

Proper Utilization of Natural and Human Resources

Prout supports the maximum utilization of the planet's resources, which means to make the best use of them, with economic and mechanical efficiency, while still protecting the natural environment. It is our conviction that everyone can experience a high quality of life if we use our resources wisely. Mark Friedman quotes the American scientist and visionary R. Buckminster Fuller as saying, "We have enough technological know-how at our disposal to give everyone a decent life, and release humanity to do what it is supposed to be doing—that is, using our minds, accomplishing extraordinary things, not just coping with survival" (Friedman 2001).

The natural resources gifted by nature belong to everyone and are to be used for the welfare of all. The economically developed nations of the world amassed their wealth by taking natural resources from other nations, first through colonization and later through very favorable trade policies and debt manipulation. To counter this detrimental practice, local processing industries should be created nearby the sources of raw materials, ensuring full employment for all local people, who can then trade or sell the finished goods to other regions for the economic prosperity of the local people in both areas.

Prout also proposes the maximum utilization of all human resources, emphasizing the value of both individual and collective well-being. According to Prout, there is no inevitable conflict between individual and collective interests. Rather, their true interests are shared. Healthy individuals create a healthy society, just as a healthy society fosters the development of healthy individuals.

In contrast, a materialistic consumer society pressures people to increase their own pleasures and comforts, indifferent to the needs of others. The results of excessive individualism can be seen in the breakdown of the family and the selfish "me-first" attitude, which is sadly all too prevalent throughout the Western world.

This principle, however, does not support abandoning all individuality for the intended good of collective society. Communist governments have amply demonstrated the danger of excessive collectivism. Society needs to respect human diversity, and to allow people the freedom to think for themselves, to express their creativity, and to form diverse relationships. An important goal of Prout is to encourage individuals to realize their full potential and achieve their dreams and goals.

Wastage of metaphysical or intellectual resources occurs when people lack education, or are denied opportunities to develop their different talents and contribute their ideas because of racial or sexual discrimination or economic exploitation. How wonderful it will be when all the creativity of human beings is encouraged and channeled toward improving our world, instead of it being wasted or misdirected in advertising to convince us to purchase what we do not need.

Economic Democracy

Prout promotes economic democracy, which shifts decision-making power away from a small minority of corporate shareholders and vests it with the local people. It proposes a dynamic economy of the people, by the people, and for the people. Through democratic cooperatives and decentralization, the people can meet all their basic needs with adequate purchasing power. In addition, special amenities, facilities, and services should be provided to deserving individuals who contribute to society. When each region and state, and, as much as possible, each community is self-reliant in food, then the people will not suffer from food shortages or inflated prices due to transportation breakdowns or a rise in oil prices.

Another requirement for economic democracy is that outsiders must be strictly prevented from interfering in the local economy or taking away profits.

In fact, effective political democracy with full political rights is not possible without economic democracy and corresponding economic rights, including the guaranteed minimum necessities.

One of neoliberalism's clever tricks was to put so-called "economic freedom," which implies the freedom of persons and corporations to amass wealth beyond measure, on the same footing with fundamental human rights. The idea of "economic freedom" contradicts the reality that the world's resources are limited and that the actions of individuals affect the opportunities others. In law, we grant individual rights to the extent that they do not harm others. Prout's concepts incorporate this idea into economics. Sarkar further states that, "The entire wealth of the universe is the common patrimony of all" (Sarkar 1992).

An Ecological and Spiritual Perspective

Prout contains an ecological and spiritual perspective that many economic philosophies lack, but which is present in many traditional societies. Indigenous spirituality throughout the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australasia invariably revolved around nature. Indigenous people did not believe that the land belonged to them; rather, they believed they belonged to the land. Indigenous oral traditions and writing expressed intense pain at seeing miners ripping open the earth, loggers felling all the trees, the water being poisoned, the animals being slaughtered (Giblett 2004; Stevens 1997). These traditional cultures were mostly cooperative by nature and treated most of the land as a common resource.

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux spiritual leader, said, "The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Taka (the Great Spirit), and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us" (Neihardt 1932).

Today environmental sciences demonstrate that an interconnected web of living systems and organisms in dynamic balance exists throughout nature. The interdependence and interrelation of all forms of life is astounding. From the single-cell bacteria to the most complex animal, each creature inhabits its niche and plays its unique role. The cycles of birth, life, death, and decay continue in a fluctuating state of balance. In fact, one can view the environment as a factory that produces no waste at all—everything is recycled.

Prout includes the ecological perspective of traditional peoples that we all belong to the natural world. Planet Earth, her wealth of resources, as well as the rest of the universe, are the *common inheritance* of all humanity. Collectively, like brothers and sisters in a human family, we have a duty and a responsibility to utilize the earth in a sustainable manner and to fairly distribute the world's resources for the welfare of all. As the elder sisters and brothers in a family, we also have a duty to protect our younger siblings, the animals and plants and Creation.

Prout's notion of ownership is based on this spiritual concept that Sarkar terms "cosmic inheritance" (Sarkar 1993). He reasons that the Creator is not separate from the creation, but permeates and resonates in every particle of it. There is a divine essence in each human being. Prout encourages the protection of biodiversity, natural habitats, and reforestation, as well as aggressive control of air, water and soil pollution. Efforts to reduce carbon emissions and greenhouse gases are supported. Every living being has existential value in addition to utility value. Humans do not have the right to destructively exploit plants, animals, or the Earth, without regard for their well-being. The Creator invites us to use these with respect, but not to abuse them.

The spiritual potentialities of people, that which allows us to develop peace, harmony, wisdom, wholeness, and lasting happiness within, remain for the most part undiscovered in materialistic societies. Yet throughout history, a few mystics of all cultures have dedicated their lives to practicing spiritual techniques to realize this inner treasure and share it with others.

A spiritual perspective then would include respect for all beings, gratitude for all beings, and eventually ever-expanding feelings of compassion, altruism and unconditional love for all beings. This involves self-transcendence, wisdom, and connecting with the sacred, the infinite, to reach a state of perfect peace and infinite happiness. The endeavor to attain this blissful state is the human quest known as spirituality.

"Neohumanism," a term coined by Sarkar, is the process of expanding one's sentiment or allegiance from one of self-interest to one of empathy and identification with an ever-larger share of humanity. It stands for the practice of love for all creation, including plants, animals, and the inanimate world (Sarkar 1982). Prout advocates that education should be based on this, incorporating a harmonious blending of oriental introversial philosophy and occidental extroversial science. It seeks to redefine the human experience from one that is competitive, desiring to dominate and control, to one that is cooperative. Neohumanist education unleashes infinite learning capacity into our lives by expand-

ing our understanding of ourselves and our potential. Spirituality, creativity, and love are at the center of this new force. (Inayatullah, Bussey, and Milojević 2006)

What Spirituality is Not: Dogmatism

This universal spirituality is different from religion, a particular faith tradition or doctrine. It is also not about dogmas, which can be defined as any intellectual barrier beyond which one may not question. Examples of religious dogmas include: the idea that we are the chosen people of God and others are not, that ours is the only way, that we are going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell, that only our holy book is the word of God, that men are spiritually superior to women. All of these are terribly destructive, dividing humanity by creating a mentality of Us and Them, superiority and inferiority. Dogmatic leaders have incited fanaticism, hatred, intolerance, and violence.

Unfortunately, fundamentalism and religious fanaticism are increasing in many parts of the world as a reaction to the economic injustice that many people are facing. Unemployment, debt, insecurity, urbanization, and westernization are marginalizing millions. When people feel they have no future, when they are alienated because they are not a part of the capitalist dream presented by beautiful, rich, happy American actors and models, they sometimes turn to dogmatic religion in order to reclaim their hope. Religious institutions sometimes manifest structural violence, instilling fear, guilt, and inferiority.

Sarkar defended Karl Marx's condemnation of religious dogma as "the opiate of the people," writing: "A group of exploiters loudly object to a remark that was made by the great Karl Marx concerning religion. It should be remembered that Karl Marx never opposed spirituality, morality and proper conduct. What he said was directed against the religion of his time, because he perceived, understood and realized that religion had paralyzed the people and reduced them to impotence by persuading them to surrender to a group of sinners" (Sarkar 1963).

Evaluating Social Policies with Prout

Sarkar's work is exciting because it allows policy makers and activists to effectively measure and compare policies for the greater good of all people, as well as the planet. The goal is for all people to maintain themselves, to develop their potentialities, and to balance their individual expressions with collective interest, instead of allowing one group's interest to trump the needs of another interest.

Prout's holistic model provides an overarching framework that combines the strengths of many disciplines, including, for example, economics, political science, public health, environmental sciences, sociology, finance, administration, engineering, and law. Below is a list of sample questions to consider:

1. Are everyone's minimum needs being met in a sustainable way, both now and in the future?
2. Do federal and state governments provide: Support for balanced regional economies? A fair monetary and banking system? Rational limits on the personal accumulation of wealth? A coordinated national infrastructure and public health? A fair judicial system based on restorative justice and transformation?
3. Are communities able to provide full employment, fulfill their needs, determine their economic future, and process local resources in a sustainable manner?
4. Do individuals have all the personal freedoms included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Are there continual efforts to expand these rights according to changes in consciousness?
5. Is the structure flexible enough to change as needs change?

Policy evaluators, to accurately answer these questions, will need to draw on varied expertise. For example, to determine if everyone's minimum necessities are being met, we need to consult social workers and nongovernmental organizations, evaluate indicators of health, poverty, and unemployment, study the pricing of essential goods and whether a person receiving a minimum wage could afford them, survey housing needs, explore issues of class, gender, race, age, and education, as well as check for environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

Prout proposes the maximum utilization and rational distribution of all natural and human resources, emphasizing the value of both individual and collective well-being. It is a holistic model of economic, social and spiritual concepts that include guaranteeing minimum necessities to all, the right to jobs, a three-tiered economy, including small-scale private enterprises, cooperatives, and large-scale publicly owned key industries, food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture, and economic democracy.

The above concepts are by no means exhaustive. For a more in-depth view of Prout, see Maheshvarananda (2004) and Sarkar (1992).

Normally, a spiritual perspective is considered a personal affair. However, Prout and neohumanism assert that an ecological and spiritual perspective that is universal and nondogmatic is essential to creating a truly just society. To feel connected with everyone and everything, to feel compassion for all, to develop even love for all, suggests that our social and economic system cannot exclude anyone.

The authors suggest that an evaluative policy framework based on Prout be developed to effectively measure and compare policies for the greater good of all

people as well as the planet. This would allow both activists and policy makers to decide campaigns and raise awareness about key issues in the best way possible.

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The mission of the **Prout Research Institute of Venezuela** is to empower all people to improve their quality of life and live in a more just society by fostering the development of worker cooperatives, self-reliant communities, environmental protection, universal ethics and spiritual values. Address correspondence for both authors to Prout Research Institute of Venezuela, Quinta Prout, Calle Terepaima con Monsen Sol, El Marques, Caracas 1070, Venezuela. Telephone: 58-212-886-23-23. Website: http://www.priven.org. E-mail: ivip@prout.org.

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