

Human progress and the republican state

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The ideas of economic development and human progress are central to the modern world. Modern national societies have defined for themselves, historically, a few major political goals and their respective ideologies in addition to the goals of domestic social order and international security that already existed before. With the eighteenth century liberal revolutions and the Enlightenment, individual freedom and liberalism; at the turn to the 19th century, with the Industrial Revolution in England, economic development and economic nationalism or developmentalism; in the second half of the 19th century, with the emergence of social movements, socialist parties, and the papal encyclical “*Rerum Novarum*”, social justice and socialism; and in the second half of the 20th century, with the 1972 Stockholm conference of the United Nations and the threat of climate change, protection of nature and environmentalism. These are final objectives to which I add three instrumental objectives, social cohesiveness, national autonomy, and democracy.

In this historical framework, the Industrial Revolution in England, in late eighteenth century, remains a mark of the transition to capitalism, but the formation of the nation-state was the key element in each country’s capitalist revolution. The nation-state is the territorial sovereign society formed by a nation, a state, and a territory, as the empires were territorial societies proper to slave societies. I originally used the term “human development”, but I changed to human progress because human development was associated to a remarkable initiative of the economist Mahbub ul Haq, who, associated to Amartya Sen, developed in the 1990s the Human Development Index (HDI) in the United Nations Development Program. To build this index, he considered only three variables which are available in practically all countries – the increase in per capita income, life expectancy, and the literacy rate of people over 15 years old. This was a realistic choice which allowed the United Nations to calculate and publish early the index. The human progress that I am proposing is not an alternative to the HDI. It is a much broader and an abstract concept that cannot be measured but is the direction toward which nations search to move. Human progress is associated with the historical process through which the republican citizens of modern nations deploy their civic obligations to the state, the national societies, and the world society, thus assuring their human rights. Human progress is a historical and dialectical process of advancing and sometimes falling back in the realization of these objectives.

The idea of progress dates to the Enlightenment, while the idea of human progress dates to the post-Second World War era. Economic development,

which is at the basis of human progress, materialised to each country only after national and industrial revolutions took place, starting with Britain, but it was only after Second World War that it became a universal objective and received a name, “sustained development”. As Ignacy Sachs noted:

In the beginning, economic growth served as a substitute for development. Later, other dimensions were gradually added to the concept, leading to a litany of adjectives... I work today with the concept of socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and economically sustained development.ⁱ

When discussing progress, we must make a distinction between the idea and the reality of human progress. The battle for the idea of progress – for the rational progress of nations toward their consensual political objectives is more advanced than its realization. In the more developed countries religious fundamentalism and right-wing populism are a marginal resistance to the universal principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Economic development and human progress are not linear processes. In certain moments we can see historical regressions, as was neoliberalism from the 1980s and right-wing populism from the 2010s. The battle for human progress is far from being won. The idea of progress is associated with education, the development of science, the rejection of intolerance, the increase of the material well-being, the reduction of political and economic inequality, and the protection of the environment. There has been some advance in these areas, but the basic economic needs are still far from being met, economic inequality and political inequality remain extremely high, and the protection of nature is advancing but the achievement of the climate change targets is not assured. Human reason was successful in defeating superstition and religion, not the scarcity of goods and the surplus of privileges. The Panglossian optimism is a conservative strategy.ⁱⁱ The belief in progress enables rejecting pessimism or cynicism, which is often associated to conservatism. Believing that the reign of liberty may, little by little, overcome the reign of necessity through the construction of a democratic and republican state is important. The welfare state that the European societies have built represented human progress.

The idea of progress arose in the 18th century, while the idea of economic development emerged in two moments –with the Industrial Revolution and the classical book by Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, and as a theory and a national project, after the Keynesian Revolution and World War II, with the name of “development economics” – or, as I prefer to say, of classical developmentalism. Economic development was then defined as a process of structural change or productive sophistication.

There is an ancient intellectual tradition that associates the idea of progress with the advent of Christianity. Progress would be the achievement of the Christian promise of the millennium, the "city of God", which would have replaced the dominant view in antiquity that empires or civilizations were characterised by a cyclical movement of prosperity and decay. A defender of this view is Robert Nisbet who states that “the idea of progress is not exclusively modern, born of the Enlightenment, but goes back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and, more specifically, to St. Augustine and a long and continuous lineage of his followers through the centuries.” The Greek ideal, Aristotle's “good life”, was supposed to be achieved collectively in the polis; the Roman

ideal was similar – building of the republic. It is true that the Greek democracy and the Roman republic were important political achievements, but they were not compatible with the economic and social conditions of the time and were soon abandoned. Christians, led by St. Augustine, saw progress as the realization of the “city of God,” but this view has little to do with what we mean by progress. For the Greeks, the good life and public interest were to be achieved here and now, by all free men, while for the Christians the goal was salvation. In both cases, the idea of progress understood as a historical process was not present.

For the Enlightenment philosophers, the key to progress was the advancement of reason and science – of the universal over the particular; it was the search for rational foundations of morality, rather than traditional or religious foundations; it is the progress of science and society. We learn this, for example, from the Marquis of Condorcet. Writing during the French Revolution, just before he was put to death for the Terror, he claims that “man's perfectibility is indeed unlimited; that the progress of this perfectibility, now independent of the powers that tried to prevent it, will not end while the earth lasts”. But even then, progress was not just the advancement of reason and science; it was also the improvement of living standards. It is not by chance that Turgot, an economist – one of the Physiocrats – can be considered the founder of the idea of progress. On the importance of economics in progress, Condorcet, perhaps the most powerful advocate of progress as the realization of reason, was quite clear: the progress of industries and the well-being of each generation stems “from its own progress, or of the preservation of the achievements of the previous generations”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, Auguste Comte turned progress into dogma and defined it as “the continuous progression towards a certain goal... the continuous improvement not only of our condition, but also and mainly of our nature”.^{iv} He was too optimistic; education and moral principles may make us better citizens, but they don't change our nature, which is at the same time selfish and convivial; it merely sets the limits for the survival instinct and stimulates our belonging instinct.

The idea of progress was born out of a rationalist and anti-religious Enlightenment. If we had to define eighteenth-century philosophers by just one claim, it would be that of the secularization of the state – the separation of religion and state. Human progress and economic development are modern concepts; progress dates from the Enlightenment, economic development, from post-World War II. My argument is that *human progress* is the historical process by which national societies achieve their political goals.

Taking rights instead of political goals as reference, human progress is the gradual achievement of human rights that modern societies have also defined for themselves: the rule of law, civil rights, or the basic freedoms that characterise the rule of law; political rights and the universal suffrage; social rights; and republican rights, the right to *res publica* or public patrimony (including the natural environment), the right that every citizen has that the public patrimony is used for public purposes and/or in the light of the public interest.^v Human progress and economic development are not the continuous advance of the “civilization”, but, as Michael Löwy remarked, as “a dialectical view of the historical process: in many ways civilization represented progress, but in others

it constituted a social and moral regression from what was primitive communism”.^{vi} Human progress involves some convergence of all people around these objectives, but opens room for large national differences.

By good society I don't mean an ideal society but relatively cohesive society that advances in the realization of the great political objectives that the more advanced societies began to define since the eighteenth century. The progress achieved by each nation-state is greater the individual freedom, material well-being, social justice, and protection of the environment it assures, and the more it achieves the instrumental objectives of security, national autonomy and democracy. A national society will be more cohesive, the more its citizens share the values and beliefs around which the nation is organised, the more legitimate and capable will be its state, the more its citizens share a common history, common interests, and reasonably agree on its objectives. In the good society cohesiveness is important but relative because its state is supposed to legitimise and regulates the social conflicts which the advancement of human progress requires.

Commented [AAC1]: Se você estiver accito a minha sugestão anterior, aqui deve ser substituído por coesão social. E segurança deve ser adicionada duas linhas acima antes de liberdade individual.

Historical stages and institutions

In the history of humanity, we had the agricultural revolution, around twelve thousand years ago, and the national and industrial revolution or simply the capitalist revolution that has begun in the city-states of North Italy around the thirteenth century. This revolution was first completed in Britain and, still in the nineteenth century, the other central countries soon followed, formed their own nation-state, and realised the respective industrial revolutions, while the peripheral countries, with a few exceptions, had to fight modern imperialism to achieve their own economic development and human progress.

Considering the history of mankind, we can see three major *stages*: tribal society, slavery society, and capitalist society. This macro periodization becomes clearer if we consider the two main institutions in each phase. In tribal societies, tradition and religion were the two main institutions coordinating society; in slavery societies or the ancient empires, religion again and the ancient state performed this role; and, in capitalist societies, the modern state and markets are the main coordinative institutions. Thus, the secondary institution in each phase becomes the primary institution in the following phase. The ancient state in the slave societies was essentially an instrument of the military and land-owning oligarchy devoted to war for the purpose of conquest and colonization, or to plunder and to reduce the dispossessed to slavery. Together with religion, it coordinated and legitimised the power of the governing oligarchy.

Table 1 shows the two basic institutions in each form of political-territorial society, in the three stages of the history of tribal communities, slave and capitalist. In this table the institutions are not limited to the economic coordination but to the whole regulation of the respective societies. In this table, the tribes are the loose territorial communities of tribal societies; the classical empires are the ever-expanding or narrowing political-territorial unity (it does not arrive to be a society) where slaves produce while the military and religious aristocracy takes charge of wars, religion, administration, and colonies; and the nation-state is the political-territorial society specific of capitalism.

Table 1.1: Historical stages and respective coordination

Historical stages	Political-territorial societies	Coordinating institutions	
		Main	Second
Tribal	Tribes	Tradition	Religion
Slave	Classical empires	Religion	State
Capitalist	Nation-states	State	Market

The good society

Under an optimistic perspective, the history of humanity may be seen as the search for the good society. A good society that, since the early nineteenth century, utopian reformers identified with socialism, the bourgeoisie, with liberalism. Under a more realistic approach, history is story of the powerful and the rich to impose their domination over the common people. In any case, a good society which will be always a social construction in which the social actors will have influence on the extent that in each national state they dispose of wealth, knowledge, and political prestige or charisma.

Since the rise of capitalism, social actors have been historically devoted the constitution of the nation and of civil society, the construction of a state, and the occupation of a territory, thus forming their nation-state – the politico-territorial society proper to capitalism. A political society endowed of domestic market that is the condition for the respective industrial revolution and the beginning of capital accumulation and economic growth. Within this historical framework, the nation is a people that share a common history, a common destiny, and can build a state and form their own nation-state; the nation is devoted to the national autonomy, the national security, and economic development, while the civil society is this same politically organised society but politically oriented to individual freedom, social justice, and the protection of nature.

The philosophical discussion of what is or should be the good society is a theme that was central in ancient Greece. In this quest, the founding philosopher was Aristotle – a realistic philosopher who, in *Politics*, although distinguishing three forms of government and their respective ideologies, realised that the real political problem in Athens in the fourth century BC was the fight between two corrupt forms of government: oligarchy and democracy. For Aristotle, the good society is the society in which individuals are free and have a good life. The political regime will not be oligarchic, nor democratic, but should be a mixed political regime, in which freedom is not a negative freedom as it is for liberalism (the state assuring the individual do whatever she or he wants provided it is not against the law), but a positive freedom: the freedom of citizens who participate actively from politics, is ready to subordinate her main objectives to the public interest or the common good.

This is the form of state and the concept of freedom which, after the contributions of Cicero in the Roman Republic and the humanists in Firenze and Venezia, achieved a definitive condition in the works Nicolo Machiavelli. It is the form of government which rejects the negative view of the human nature but does not fall into the opposite view of believing that individuals are originally good. A society is good not because all its citizens are endowed of civic virtues,

but because there is a “reasonable” number of citizens with such political qualities – citizens that often sacrifice their personal interest in name of the public interest.

According to this superior concept of freedom, the good state will not be just a democratic and developmental state, but also a “republican state”. Civic humanism or republican civic values emerged in Rome, with Cicero; reappeared in the northern Italian republics of the *quattrocento*, with Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444); had their first ‘modern’ affirmation in the Renaissance, with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527); in the seventeenth century, arrived to England, with James Harrington (1611-1677); in the eighteenth century, to France with Montesquieu (1689-1755) and Rousseau (1712-1778), to the United States, with Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804) and James Madison (1751-1836)^{vii}. The first great modern philosopher to adopt republicanism was Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), a direct successor of the humanists, with his concept of *virtù* and his book *Discourses on Livy* (1517). The concept of republican state is associated to the concept of “organic” state discussed by Alfred Stepan – a concept that is also originated in Aristotle’s philosophy but was continued in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas and became the social doctrine of the Catholic church.^{viii}

In 1997, I developed the concept or “republican rights” in the essay, “Citizenship and res publica: The emergence of the rights republican rights”.^{ix} I started from the classical 1950 essay by H.G. Marshall on the successive historical affirmation of rights in modern societies: in the eighteenth century, of the civil rights, in the nineteenth century, the political rights, and in the first half of the twentieth century, the social rights.^x

Adopting the same historical method, I argued that in the last quarter of the twentieth century the “republican rights” were emerging – the right that each citizen has that the *res publica* is used for public objectives. I made such claim because I was seeing on the left and the right academic and politicians concerned with the capture of the patrimony. The conservative economists, following a proposition of Anne Krueger, developed the concept of “rent seeking”; the left spoke of the “privatization of the state”.

But why to speak of fourth type of citizens’, why to give a name to an obvious right whose disrespect is corruption – a crime identified and punished by all countries? The reason was that the violation of the republican rights is usually legal, is protected by the law. Businessmen capture the public patrimony by obtaining exemption of taxes, or investment incentives which are assumed to be industrial policy but are not. Rentiers and financiers capture the public patrimony by obtaining that the central bank define high interest rates supposedly to fight inflation. Public officers capture the public patrimony with high salaries and pensions with no relation with the work done. The violence against the republican rights exists in every country, but they are more visible in middle-income countries like Brazil in which the state is not simply a corrupt a predator state, or relatively honest state as is the case in the most advanced democracies.

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The republican state

The concept of republican rights starts from an assumption opposite to the one behind the concept of civil rights. While the civil rights assume a weak individual facing a powerful state, the republican rights assume a vulnerable state facing the capture of powerful individuals and interest groups. Giving that, we can say that the republican state is the state strong enough to protect itself from private capture; is the state able to defend the public patrimony against rent-seeking. To be strong in this way, the republican state is a legitimate state, its laws are observed and respected. It is a participatory state in which citizens organised in civil society are called to define new policies and institutions; it is the accountable state; it is a state that relies upon government officers who, although self-interested, are also concerned with the public interest; it is a state with an effective capacity to reform institutions and enforce the law; it is the state that tax citizens in order to finance collective actions democratically decided. Summing up, the republican state is a polity that counts upon engaged citizens participating with politicians and civil servants in governing.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, when republican rights acquired historical significance, while civil society organizations gained national and international relevance, it became obvious that a basic political challenge was to build a state capable of protecting itself from greedy and powerful individuals or corporations, while being able to organise collective action towards assuring citizenship rights. On the other hand, after the ultra-liberal offensive proved unable to eliminate or even reduce social rights, states became stronger politically, which, however, did not mean a return to the social-democratic model. It became increasingly clear that such a model had been an excessive reaction against the classical liberal state, that free markets were an extraordinary powerful tool for promoting wealth and for guaranteeing freedom when duly regulated by the state.

Thus, a middle-way solution now had its turn. Instead of a trade-off between liberal values and social rights, it became even more obvious that only a strong state could guarantee strong markets. It is also becoming evident that citizens who have their social rights judiciously protected behave more freely and more actively in markets than those who are not so protected. In this chapter I examine the social-liberal state that springs from this combination of state and markets, of individual pursuit of personal autonomy and citizens' demands for increased social security or for the protection of social rights. In the next chapter I will discuss at length the concepts of the republican state and of republican or participatory democracy.

To increase state capacity and build the republican state, modern societies will have to rely on politicians, civil servants, and citizens who are ready to participate in the political process, endowed with patriotism or civic virtues. Although concern for the protection of the *res publica* and civic participation are old phenomena, they became widespread – as a concern of the people and not only of the elites – only in the last quarter of the twentieth century. At the same time, the social-democratic state fell into crisis and market-oriented reforms became a central feature of globalization.

Markets, whose role in resource allocation had been reduced during the era of the social-democratic state, gained a new primacy — but not to the extent that

neo-liberals expected. Social rights, which came under severe attack during the neo-liberal wave, resisted to it in almost all countries, as civil society rejected proposals for a minimal state. On the contrary, the role of the state in ensuring competitive markets, freedom, and social justice expanded. Instead of forcing its organization to return to bureaucratic public administration, consistent with the liberal state, or to the huge social bureaucracies developed by the social-democratic state, the state was involved in public management reform. And all this is possible if citizens, organised in civil society, are proving able to effectively take part in public affairs and to outline the framework of a participatory and republican democracy.

I say that the republican state will be democratic, liberal, and social, but we know that these ideals have been historically in mutual conflict. Although liberal and democratic ideals clashed in early nineteenth century, they eventually turned out to be compatible when liberals and democrats gave up their radical views. If we define liberalism as toleration or pluralism, the affirmation of civil rights, and we exclude exacerbate individualism, and define socialism as the effective protection of social rights or a central concern for social justice, the two ideologies may be compatible. From now on, I will begin by acknowledging the classic conflict between republican and liberal ideals, and between republican and democratic ones, but I will again conclude that they can be made and are being made compatible provided that these ideals are not adopted radically. More than that: I will say that to the modern republican state corresponds a more advanced form of representative democracy, namely, participatory, or deliberative democracy.

This definition of the republican state is related to the classical republican tradition, but I don't claim that it is faithful to it. The Greek and Roman republics were a reality and an ideal. The eighteenth-century republicans had to combine the classical republican ideas with political liberalism – a philosophy based on an individualism that is often in contradiction with the idea of republic. As in early nineteenth century Benjamin Constant realised, the freedom of the “ancients” is different from the freedom of the “moderns”. The freedom of liberals is the right to do whatever you want provided it is not against the law; the republican freedom requires more; to be free the citizen must participate from public life and give priority to the public interest in relation to the private interest. The twenty-first century republican state will necessarily be a different reality, which requires new concepts and new theoretical considerations, which involves specific values or ideologies.

The republican state is viable in the context of an active civil society in which the principles of liberal, social, and participatory or deliberative democracy are observed. Republican states will differ from country to country, reflecting their history and cultures, but they will share some basic and common values and institutions. Are we heading towards republican states? I believe so. Since the emergence of the modern state, democratic polities have been progressing – not linearly, not following a steady state, but through ups and downs, major advances, and tragic retrogression. Advanced countries today count upon more effective institutions in making politicians and bureaucratic officials more accountable and in protecting the state against rent-seeking, and upon more educated and participatory citizens. Republican rights, although constantly violated, are today better defined, and protected. Institutional reform, and

particularly public management reform, are advancing, which means that the state is becoming more capable.

The Neoliberal Turn, around 1980, which we will discuss at length in this book, represented one of these tragic moments of historical regression. But this was a failed imperial project which, in 2021, with the threat represented by global warming and the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, collapsed. Advanced capitalist societies are in this moment searching for economic and political alternatives.

In the following analysis an empirical aspect and a normative aspect will be present. From a historical perspective, I believe it reasonable to predict the gradual rise of the republican state; from a normative one, I hope it will happen. This normative vein does not conflict with the historical one. On the contrary, they mutually reinforce each other. Historical developments point in this direction, and the challenges that collective action faces today require that institutions are invented and reformed to be consistent with this kind of state. I see things in this way, despite all the problems that advanced democracies face today. They are ripe for the emergence of the republican state, and so it is time to discuss how it may come about.

Historically, such values and the political currents behind them have clashed, but contemporary advanced democracies mainly in Europe learned to integrate them and to arrive at compromises or, more than that, quasi-consensus. In the past, when liberalism opposed democratic ideals and demanded an authoritarian state to protect individual liberties, it was assuming an all-powerful state and powerless individuals; now, when republicanism demands protection for the *res publica*, the assumption is the reverse. Yet, in both cases, the combination of self-interest and public interest is essential. Without a reasonably clear notion of public interest, it is impossible to define the *res publica*. In general, *res publica* is the public good; in a narrower sense, it is the public patrimony.^{xi} Without a republican perspective it is difficult to defend the public patrimony.

If citizens lack clear notions of the public patrimony and of the public interest, their defence is hopeless.^{xii} As an embodiment of the common good or of the public interest, the *res publica* includes not only what is state-owned and the public budget, but also nature, which is eminently public. Democratic governance is the main process whereby modern polities define, on each issue, what the public interest is. Thus, the republican state is intrinsically democratic. But it is more than democratic because, just as it can protect individual citizens, so it is able to protect itself from conflicting interests: it possesses the institutions and the citizens that make for such protection.

ⁱ Sachs (2009: 8).

ⁱⁱ Doctor Pangloss is the conservative preceptor in Voltaire's *Candide* whose optimism was radical. Facing the worse possible realities, he always concluded that "this is the best of all possible worlds".

ⁱⁱⁱ Condorcet (1793: 81; 281).

^{iv} Comte (1844: 154; 156).

^v Bresser-Pereira (2002a).

^{vi} Lowy (2021).

^{vii} Historians of ideas, like J. G. A. Pocock (1975), Quentin Skinner (1978, 1998), and Newton Bignotto (2001); political philosophers, as Philip Pettit (1997) and Richard Dagger (1997) discuss republicanism.

^{viii} Stepan (1978 [2001]).

^{ix} Bresser-Pereira (1997 [2001]).

^x Marshall (1950).

^{xi} It is also possible to think of the *res publica* in terms of a political regime – the republican system – or in terms of the state itself.

^{xii} See Smend's analysis (1934) of the public and public thing problem.