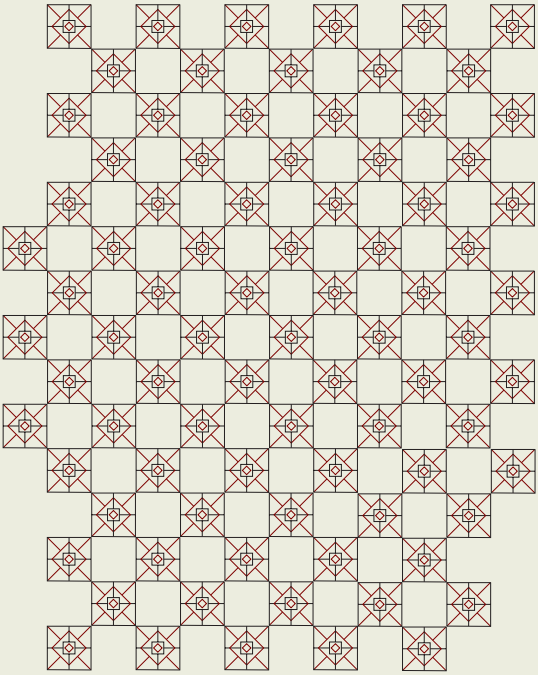

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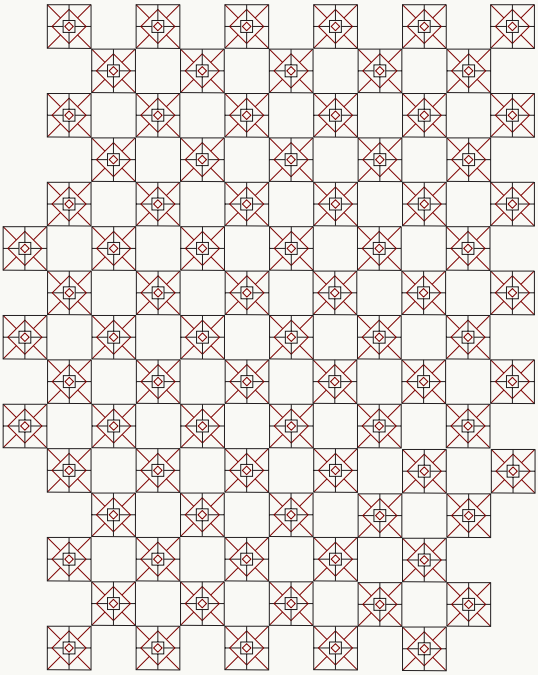

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Retro SPEKTIVE

Editorial Introduction

9

The Ambivalence of Progress

Ambivalenca napredka

Robin Dolar

11

DEFINING PROGRESS

The question of progress represents one of the central issues in human history.[1] As we reflect on the transformations that have occurred over time, it is natural to ask whether they have improved the lives of ordinary people and what their broader significance has been. Is humanity better off now than it was in previous eras? Does the trajectory of history point toward further improvement? Although the primary aim of historians is to analyze rather than evaluate the past, it nevertheless lies within the scope of historiography to consider such macro-historical questions.

The purpose of this special issue is to directly engage with the debates surrounding the concept of progress. It is therefore useful to start with a brief reflection on the meaning of this term. Robert Nisbet, one of the historians who has examined the conceptual history of progress in depth, provides a useful initial definition: *"the idea of progress holds that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future."*[2]

This definition can be unpacked into several components. The first concerns the temporal structure that is implied by the concept of progress. At its core, progress presupposes a linear conception of temporality in which the future is regarded as better than the present, and the present better than the past. While this may appear self-evident to us today, it is far from the only way of organizing temporal experience. For much of human history, alternative frameworks predominated.

A static conception of time, for instance, conceives the past, present, and future as essentially identical. This is the structure of frameworks cen-

1 This special issue grew out of the doctoral and postdoctoral workshop "The Ambivalence of Progress," held in Ljubljana in November 2024. I would like to thank the Slovene History Research Team for making the workshop possible, and the journal *Retrospektive* for generously providing the venue for this publication. Special thanks are due to Professor Rok Stergar, Associate Professor Kornelija Ajlec, and Associate Professor Peter Mikša.

2 Nisbet, Robert. *History of the Idea of Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 1980, 4–5.

tered on timeless and omnipotent deities, whose existence is not marked by beginnings or endings and is not affected by temporal change. The static understanding of time has underpinned religious worldviews across numerous cultures and historical periods.[3]

A cyclical conception of time, by contrast, considers the future as a mirror of the past. While this view was especially prevalent in antiquity, it can be vividly illustrated by the Renaissance and the Reformation. Both of these ideological currents distinguished between a distant golden age – whether the glories of antiquity or the beginnings of Christianity – and the more recent past. The latter was understood as a dark medieval period that they sought to overcome. The aim of humanists and Protestants, then, was to reshape the present not by imagining a new future, but by restoring an idealized past.[4]

The linear conception of time implies either a regressive or progressive succession of the past, present, and future. Christian eschatology provides an example (in certain respects), as it is structured around the three decisive moments of Genesis, the advent of Christ, and the final judgment. These events are ordered in a linear sequence with multiple distinct elements. In other words, no elements of the past return, and each stage represents something different from what precedes or follows it.[5]

However, Christian eschatology is not a direct parallel to the idea of progress as it is understood in modernity. The reason is that the central developments within this framework are preordained by the transcendent divine will. Even though human affairs constantly change, the ultimate horizon is determined by the Apocalypse. The future is therefore not subject to change.

3 Pomian, Krzysztof. *Red časa.* Trans. Vera Troha. Ljubljana: Krtina, 2010, 54.

4 *Ibid.*, 61–66.

5 *Ibid.*, 55–60.

It is only when this eschatological framework is set aside that the concept of progress attains its modern form.[6] Since the advent of the Enlightenment, the future has no longer been understood to be a mirror of the past or predetermined by forces external to history. Instead, it has become a domain of new possibilities, ones that can be imagined as significant improvements from the present. Crucially, the link between the present and the future is understood to lie in human action. Humanity has been called upon to determine its own destiny, as it were.[7]

The modern notion of progress thus entails both a particular temporal framework and an identification of the agent responsible for historical change. What about the contents of that change? What counts as improvement?

Nisbet identifies two central themes that have traditionally addressed this issue. The first is the advancement of knowledge and the related improvement of technology. Human understanding accumulates over generations because each generation can build on the intellectual achievements of its predecessors. This is the image captured by the metaphor of "standing on the shoulders of giants": present generations see further not because individuals have superior capacities, but because they inherit a higher starting point. A parallel development is the advancement of technology, which provides humans with the ability to master their environment.[8]

The second theme that has traditionally constituted the substance of progress involves the consideration of moral and spiritual development. Improvements in knowledge and technologies do not, by themselves, ensure that humanity is better off. Indeed, many thinkers have argued that technological progress can coincide with, or even produce, moral degradation. Whatever perspective is assumed, the point to emphasize is that

6 Koselleck, Reinhart. *Pretekla prihodnost: prispevki k semantiki zgodovinskih časov.* Trans. Igor Kramberger. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 1999, 307–308.

7 *Ibid.*, 313–339.

8 Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 5.

any conception of progress presupposes an interpretation of the good life against which past and present can be evaluated.[9]

Taken together, the basic components of the concept of progress can be portrayed as follows. Humanity begins in simple societies that are guided by superstition and in possession of only primitive tools. Through the use of their own talents and abilities, humans develop better understanding and sophisticated technologies, gradually mastering nature and improving their condition. The culmination of this trajectory is the emergence of modern science and the Industrial Revolution. Given the long-term persistence of these trends and their intensification in modernity, there is no reason to expect them to end. The future looks bright.

This view of history has been extremely influential since the Enlightenment. At the same time, however, the history of the idea of progress is also the history of those who oppose it.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST PROGRESS

Skepticism regarding the concept of progress takes many forms and can be found across the political spectrum. Conservatives tend to reject the very premise of a forward movement, and instead defend the preservation of traditional values and institutions. Left-wing critics, on the other hand, often argue that the concept of progress obscures the actual historical record. In this sense, progress is not a neutral descriptive term but a highly ideological one. While a comprehensive account of these issues is

9 *Ibid.*, 5–6.

beyond the present discussion, the following questions provide an overview of some of the main arguments leveled against progress.[10]

How has the notion of progress been used historically? Ideas that appear benevolent are often mobilized to legitimize forms of domination, and the language of progress is no exception. Perhaps the most obvious example of this point comes from the 19th century, when this concept was integrated into the logic of European imperialism. Western societies described themselves as more advanced and claimed a civilizing mission that justified the violent subjugation of other peoples. The notion was also used to promote scientific racism and eugenics, where "progress" was invoked to defend hierarchies that we now recognize as indefensible. It is important to emphasize that these are not accidental misuses of an otherwise virtuous idea. Rather, they reflect an ambivalence that is inherent in the concept itself. That is to say, the internal logic of progress can be, and often has been, aligned with exclusion and domination.

Who is left out of progress? Even when developments that most of us would consider positive occur, they rarely encompass the broader population. Contemporary debates about inequality exemplify this point. While modern societies are marked by significant economic growth, the gains of that growth tend to disproportionately serve a narrow segment of the population, leaving the majority without the benefits that the rhetoric of progress implies. A related dynamic appears on a global scale: Western prosperity has long been intertwined with the extraction of resources from the Global South. In both cases, what is presented as broadly beneficial turns out to be highly limited. Progress implies universality, but in reality, it is selective.

10 For a range of critical perspectives on modernity and progress, see: Chomsky, Noam, and Marv Waterstone. *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance*. London: Penguin Books, 2021; Eisenstadt, Shmuel N., ed. *Multiple Modernities*. New York: Routledge, 2017; Harvey, David. *Kratka zgodovina neoliberalizma*. Trans. Rok Kogej. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 2012; Piketty, Thomas. *A Brief History of Equality*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2022; Rutherford, Adam. *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022; Žižek, Slavoj. *Against Progress: Žižek's Essays*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.

Who is the agent of progress? A common assumption is that progress inherently follows from structural trends, such as technological development, or that it is driven by a small group of elites. However, the historical record complicates this claim. For example, during the first Industrial Revolution, unprecedented technological advances did not immediately improve the living standards of most people, as at least half a century passed before the majority experienced real gains.[11] Those gains came only when popular movements challenged the political order and forced a more equitable distribution of wealth. Progress has, therefore, often resulted not from the natural consequences of new technologies or the generosity of elites, but from collective struggles carried out by those with the least power.

Finally, what new problems are brought about by progress? The discourse of progress typically highlights the benefits and minimizes the downsides of new developments. Technology again provides an obvious example. New devices may increase efficiency, but they also generate drawbacks that did not previously exist. The digital revolution, for instance, made us more connected than ever, but also created new forms of dependency, distraction, and psychological harm. From a broader perspective, we can say that modern economic growth has raised general living standards, but that it has also produced an unprecedented environmental catastrophe. In other words, developments celebrated as progress often carry negative side effects that are integral to the very processes that produce their benefits.

All of these aspects are, of course, connected. A concise way of illustrating this point is to consider the arguments presented within the framework of historical materialism, which arguably represents the most powerful critique of progress. A Marxist perspective would emphasize that productivity gains that result from the capitalist mode of production were often used to justify the dispossession of indigenous populations; that the benefits of growth have consistently and disproportionately favored the capi-

11 Allen, Robert C. "Engels' Pause: Technical Change, Capital Accumulation, and Inequality in the British Industrial Revolution." *Explorations in Economic History*, 46/4 (2009), 418–435.

talist class; that improvements in living standards have primarily resulted from worker resistance, not capitalist initiative; and that the incentives that created modern prosperity now undermine an effective response to the ecological crisis. The point, then, is that these issues represent outcomes produced by capitalism's own structure. They are not accidents or external factors but follow from the system's basic dynamics.[12]

PROGRESS IN THIS ISSUE

Debates about progress have received renewed attention over the past two decades. This resurgence can be attributed to the popularity of the so-called "New Optimists," a group of authors who argue that the modern world is significantly better than any earlier historical period.[13] Steven Pinker, their most prominent advocate, assembles large amounts of quantitative data to argue that modern societies have achieved remarkable improvements in living standards, wealth, democracy, and more. Unsurprisingly, the New Optimist accounts have drawn significant criticism from the aca-

12 For contemporary historical materialist perspectives, see: Brenner, Robert. "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong." In: *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham, 49–111. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Chibber, Vivek. *Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It*. London and New York: Verso, 2022; Krašovec, Primož. *Tujost kapitala*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2021; Rutar, Tibor. *Sodobni zagovor historičnega materializma: sociologija, filozofija, zgodovina*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2016; Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London and New York: Verso, 2017.

13 Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Ridley, Matt. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011; Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018.

demic community, with scholars contesting both their empirical claims and general conclusions.[14] The problems of progress are very much still with us.

These problems also form the background of the contributions to this issue. The opening article by Tibor Rutar defends the notion of progress by revisiting and updating several empirical claims made by the New Optimists. Drawing on new cross-national data on violence, inequality, and living standards, Rutar argues that the world of the early 21st century is indeed markedly better than the world of earlier eras. He also suggests that these positive trends are strongly correlated with institutions typically associated with modernity, such as free markets, democratic political systems, and secure property rights. While acknowledging certain complexities, Rutar provides a broadly affirmative case for modern progress.

The rest of the contributions offer a more critical perspective. My own article examines how the concept of progress is treated across different paradigms in the natural and social sciences. It explores how various frameworks understand long-term development, the character of modern institutions, and the significance of class relations. It concludes with a discussion of the political implications of these perspectives, assessing which criticisms of modernity – and especially of capitalism – are warranted. The article thus seeks to provide a nuanced view of how progress is understood in contemporary social science.

Taken together, these first two articles directly address the macro-historical issues of progress from an empirical and a theoretical standpoint. The subsequent contributions engage with the concept of progress through

14 Braumoeller, Bear F. *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; Gray, John. "John Gray: Steven Pinker Is Wrong about Violence and War." *The Guardian*, 13 March 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining (access: September 2025); Hickel, Jason. "Progress and Its Discontents." *New Internationalist*, 7 August 2019. https://newint.org/features/2019/07/01/long-read-progress-and-its-discontents (access: September 2025); Dwyer, Philip, and Mark Micale, eds. *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

more specific cases, which, from their distinct perspectives, connect back to the broader debates about its ambivalence.

Augusto Petter turns to the 19th century to analyze how the aesthetics of progress was used to legitimize monarchical authority in an age increasingly defined by civilizational comparison. After outlining how progress functioned as a framework of evaluation through which peripheral states were judged by the "civilized" West, Petter examines the foreign travels of Dom Pedro II of Brazil. Through visits to museums, universities, factories, and world exhibitions, this emperor presented an image of a cosmopolitan and progressive monarch. However, beneath these displays of modernity, Brazil remained a slaveholding society, revealing the gap between the appearance of progress and the social realities it upheld.

Julija Šuligoj examines the evolving historical understandings and representations of the female body. Beginning with an overview of feminist perspectives and the long history of female bodily representation, Šuligoj then focuses on sports – and mountaineering in particular – as a productive case study for exploring this topic. The treatment of women mountaineers shows the persistent tension between admiration for their achievements and enduring stereotypes about femininity and physical capability. This case further shows that while the 20th century saw important advances in women's participation, these gains also generated new forms of scrutiny and bias. The history of the shifting perspectives on the female body thus illustrates how progress in certain respects may simultaneously produce new challenges.

Miroslav Vašík addresses the complexities of historical transitions by analyzing how the neoabsolutist regime in the 1850s governed student reading associations in Prague. Contrary to the view of this period as wholly repressive, Vašík shows that state elites selectively supported certain forms of civic and educational activity in the service of modernization and national integration. Despite censorship, surveillance, and strict oversight, these associations managed to maintain a limited civic presence and contributed to the cultural life of the city. This case demonstrates that political regimes

often combine seemingly contradictory elements, such as modernization and repression, thereby challenging linear narratives of progress or decline.

Finally, Sarah Lias Ceide offers a conceptual history of "technocracy" as a term that reflects ambivalent attitudes toward progress. Far from being a recent invention, the concept gained prominence in the 20th century because of its ability to articulate anxieties about excessive scientific, industrial, and administrative rationalization. Tracing its use across the United States, Germany, and Italy, Ceide shows that even highly authoritarian or reactionary systems, including Fascist and Nazi governments, developed their own narratives of modernization and development. This illustrates that the idea of progress is deeply embedded in Western political imaginaries, as it can be found, at least in certain forms, even in contexts of extreme repression.

In sum, I would argue that the contributions to this issue do not necessarily suggest that the concept of progress should be abandoned altogether. After all, any political project that is not explicitly conservative relies on a forward-looking vision of society – one that includes an idea of where we are, how we arrived here, and what the future should look like. Instead, what these contributions demonstrate is that progress is a complex and multidimensional notion that cannot be reduced to a simple, linear trajectory. Its use demands careful consideration and reflection.

From a broader academic perspective, this issue shows how the question of progress can integrate diverse themes, methodologies, and historical contexts into a common framework. The concept of progress, precisely through its ambivalence and contradictions, remains a productive area of research.

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Retro SPEKTIVE

Articles

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Violence, Living Standards, and Inequality in Modern Times: Empirical Notes on Historical Progress

Nasilje, življenjski standard in neenakost v modernem času: empirične opombe o zgodovinskem napredku

Tibor Rutar

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the recent debates surrounding the "New Optimists," who argue that the last few centuries have witnessed unprecedented human progress, particularly in terms of rising living standards. Their critics, by contrast, emphasize the persistence of violence and the continued presence of high inequality in modern societies. Using long-run cross-national data on war deaths, homicide, income, and inequality, the paper finds that violence remains low and relatively contained, real after-tax incomes for the world's bottom half have more than doubled, and inequality has stabilized or declined since around 2005. Statistical analyses further show that improvements in property rights, the rule of law, and free trade consistently precede sustained increases in GDP per capita. Progress is neither teleological nor inevitable, but it is measurable, broadly ongoing, and closely tied to open economic and political institutions.

Keywords

progress, Steven Pinker, New Optimists, violence, inequality, living standards

IZVLEČEK

Članek obravnava nedavne razprave o t. i. »novih optimistih«, ki trdijo, da je prišlo v zadnjih nekaj stoletjih do izjemnega napredka človeštva, posebej kar zadeva naraščajoči življenjski standard. Nasprotno pa njihovi kritiki poudarjajo vztrajnost nasilja in trajno prisotnost visoke stopnje neenakosti v modernih družbah. Z uporabo longitudinalnih podatkov o umrlih v vojnah, umorih, dohodkih in neenakosti članek izpostavi, da nasilje ostaja na nizki ravni in razmeroma omejeno, ter da so se realni dohodki spodnje polovice svetovnega prebivalstva več kot podvojili, medtem ko se je neenakost od okoli leta 2005 ustalila ali zmanjšala. S statistično analizo dodatno pokaže, da širitev lastninskih pravic, vladavine prava in prostega trga prispevajo k dolgotrajni rasti BDP na prebivalca. Napredek ni niti teleološki niti neizbežen, je pa merljiv, pretežno trajen in tesno povezan z inkluzivnimi gospodarskimi in političnimi institucijami.

Ključne besede

napredek, Steven Pinker, novi optimisti, nasilje, neenakost, življenjski standard

INTRODUCTION

It is seemingly undeniable that humanity has witnessed stunning progress since the emergence of modernity.[1] Plummeting childhood mortality rates, significantly longer adult lives, the rise of a broad middle class, widely diffused democratic rights, and falling poverty rates are just some of the historically unprecedent achievements of the modern age. However, beyond this general summary, the details of the transition from premodernity to modernity – and especially the attendant social consequences – are highly controversial. Justifiably or not, many protest the very philosophical grounding of the notion of progress, and many more dispute some of its key long- and short-term empirical aspects.[2]

Philosophically, the notion of progress quickly runs up against charges of teleology, linearity, moral realism, complacency, or even cultural chauvinism. Let us consider teleology first. The idea is that arguing for progress necessarily commits one to the sin of arguing for historical inevitability or goal-directedness. And because this is conceptually indefensible – history is not predetermined to end up with more and more human flourishing,

1 Ridley, Matt. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018; Norberg, Johan. *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2016; Norberg, Johan. *Open: The Story of Human Progress*. London: Atlantic Books, 2020; Norberg, Johan. *The Capitalist Manifesto: Why the Global Free Market Will Save the World*. London: Atlantic Books, 2023.

2 Gray, John. "John Gray: Steven Pinker Is Wrong about Violence and War." *The Guardian*, 13 March 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war--declining (access: May 2025); Gray, John. "Unenlightened Thinking: Steven Pinker's Embarrassing New Book Is a Feeble Sermon for Rattled Liberals." *The New Statesman*, 22 February 2018. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2018/02/enlightenment-now-the-case-for-reason-science-humanism--and-progress-review-steven-pinker (access: May 2025); Braumoeller, Bear F. *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; Hickel, Jason. "Progress and Its Discontents." *New Internationalist*, 7 August 2019. https://newint.org/features/2019/07/01/long-read-progress-and-its-discontents (access: May 2025); Dwyer, Philip, and Mark Micale, eds. *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

nor does "History" (apart from individual humans) have any intentionality or goals – so too the idea of progress fails.

Let us, next, consider the charge of linearity. Even if a skeptic were to admit that progress can exist in the sense that there are periods in history where certain metrics of human flourishing are improving for the time being and for relatively contingent reasons, an immediate qualification would follow: that is, improvement does not look like a straight line pointing upwards and to the right. Instead, there are many instances of large and small reversals, with improvement looking more like a zig-zagging line.

The moral-realist rebuttal has to do with the heady controversy in metaethics and the is-ought gap. Are "goodness" and "badness" matters of objective fact easily uncovered by, say, empirical testing? Or are they fundamentally different, much more obscure and complicated? If the latter, then any simple claim that we can objectively, empirically establish that human life is getting better over time faces serious issues.

Some also think that arguing for the existence of progress means acceding to the harms and injustices that still persist to this day, despite all the positive developments that have occurred. And lastly, if not that, then it could still be charged that the idea of progress is inextricably bound up with an indefensible cultural essentialism, and thus is irreparably odious. For instance, it might be claimed that if Europe (or the "West") was the first to catalyze modernity and progress, that means it – but not other cultures – is somehow unique or superior.

The obvious reply to these critiques is that one can strip the notion of progress of all the indefensible adjectives without surrendering the core idea of significant improvement in key metrics of human flourishing over time. Indeed, progress is not predetermined, inevitable, or guaranteed. Yes, progress, to the extent it happens, is created by human agency and social institutions, the latter being themselves the product of contingent human agency in the final analysis. Progress is not linear, and it can be either partly or wholly reversed. Moreover, claiming that, say, declining

poverty and the spread of women's rights constitute progress does not imply that an objective, stance-independent moral good has been achieved. It just means that a change has occurred that is likely to be subjectively welcomed by most mentally healthy human beings.

However, even when the notion of progress is stripped of some of the burdensome philosophical baggage it has been associated with, significant empirical issues remain. Steven Pinker and his colleagues, sometimes named the "New Optimists," have been sharply criticized by some for presenting allegedly faulty data.[3] For instance, the narrative of declining violence from prehistory to modernity has been challenged as one-sided or simply wrong.[4] The trend, if it exists, might also have been inverted over the short term, as contemporary times have seen a dramatic outburst of violence with the full invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 – the largest interstate war on European soil since the Second World War – the tragic war in Gaza that started in 2023, and the enormous Tigray war that started in 2020 in Africa. Beyond war and violence, critics also fault the New Optimists for overlooking certain uncomfortable but crucial interrelated costs of modernity, such as stagnating incomes for the "have not's," neo-colonial globalization, and skyrocketing inequality.[5]

In what follows, I defend a limited, non-teleological, "weak" notion of progress that is broadly in line with the one espoused by Pinker and his colleagues. More specifically, I empirically illustrate that recent years (or

3 Burkeman, Oliver. "Is the World Really Better than Ever?" *The Guardian*, 28 July 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/jul/28/is-the-world-really-better-than-ever-the-new-optimists (access: May 2025).

4 Dwyer and Micale, *The Darker Angels*; Rutar, Tibor. "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern of Violence and War from Prehistory to Modernity: Towards an Interdisciplinary Synthesis." *Theory and Society*, 53/3 (2024), 673–699.

5 Hickel, "Progress and Its Discontents"; Hickel, Jason, Dylan Sullivan, and Huzaifa Zoomkawala. "Plunder in the Post-Colonial Era: Quantifying Drain from the Global South Through Unequal Exchange, 1960–2018." *New Political Economy*, 26/6 (2021), 1030–1047; Rutar, Tibor. "The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get ... Richer, Too: A Critical Evaluation of the Old and New Literature on Globalisation as Neoimperialism." In: *The Neoliberal World Order in Crisis, and Beyond: An East European Perspective*, eds. Marko Hočevar, Tibor Rutar, and Marko Lovec, 65–87. Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press, 2023.

decades) have not seen any kind of stark reversal of progress on some of the key metrics pointed to by critics, such as violence, income of the non--rich, or inequality. Using a novel long-run dataset, I also provide evidence that certain open political and economic institutions have historically been strongly associated with social development and progress, broadly in line with the narrative proposed by the New Optimists.

VIOLENCE IN PREHISTORY AND TODAY

More than a decade ago, Pinker argued that (1) the modern world is quite peaceful in relative terms, that (2) this is especially the case since 1945 (and even more so 1990), and that (3) there exists a long-term decline in violence since prehistory.[6]

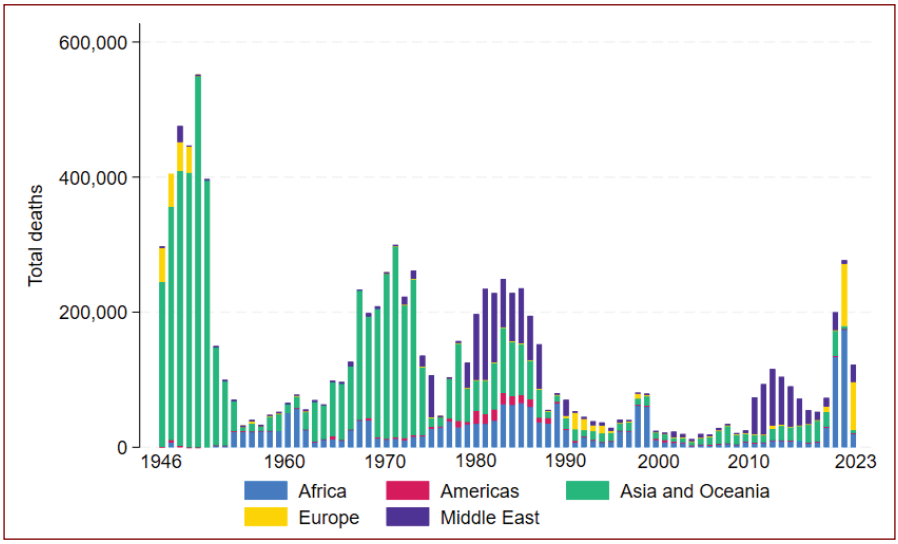

Figure 1: Combatant and civilian deaths in state-based conflicts around the world, 1946–2023.

To be accurate, however, the last statement must be strongly qualified. It seems very clear that the modal prehistoric society – nomadic hunter-

6 Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature.*

-gatherers – was not very warlike at all. Violent mortality was definitely present back then (with roughly 2–3% of all deaths attributed to it), but this was a relatively low starting point from which violence increased over the coming millennia with the transition to agriculture.[7] Then, before the development of a centralized state, rates of violence tripled from the prehistoric base as nomadic hunter-gatherers started settling and developing complex, horticulture- and agriculture-based societies.[8] Afterwards, with the consolidation of historic and especially modern states, the rate of violence fell precipitously and has remained below that of prehistoric hunter-gatherers for quite some time now.[9] Thus, instead of claiming that a relatively uniform, long-term decline in violence has been occurring since prehistoric times, a more complex, *n*-shaped (or inverted U-shaped) evolution of violence characterizes humanity from its infancy to present day.

However, given that around the world increasing human brutality has been so clearly on display for at least the past few years, can we still maintain that contemporary times are relatively peaceful, constituting the so-called "Long" or "New" peace as framed by Pinker and others? Figure 1 plots annual deaths in state-based conflicts in different parts of the world since 1946 with data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo.[10] The numbers include the deaths of combatants and civilians due to fighting in interstate, intrastate, and extra-systemic conflicts.

The data clearly show a significant flare-up in violence during the past few years, with the emergence of large-scale wars in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The post-1990 "New Peace" era is turning ever more violent, although it is too early to tell whether this constitutes a new trend or a

7 See the archaeological and anthropological evidence presented and discussed in: Rutar, "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern." See also: Rutar, Tibor. "The Prehistory of Violence and War: Moving Beyond the Hobbes–Rousseau Quagmire." *Journal of Peace Research*, 60/4 (2023), 720–726.

8 Rutar, "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern."

9 *Ibid.*

10 Davies, Shawn, Garoun Engström, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg. "Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups." *Journal of Peace Research*, 61/4 (2024), 673–693.

short blip. However, the world is still clearly no more violent today than it was during the Cold-War era of the "Long Peace." Moreover, it is precisely two widespread modern phenomena – democracy and capitalism – that seem to figure among the key drivers in the reduction of both interstate and intrastate violent conflict.[11]

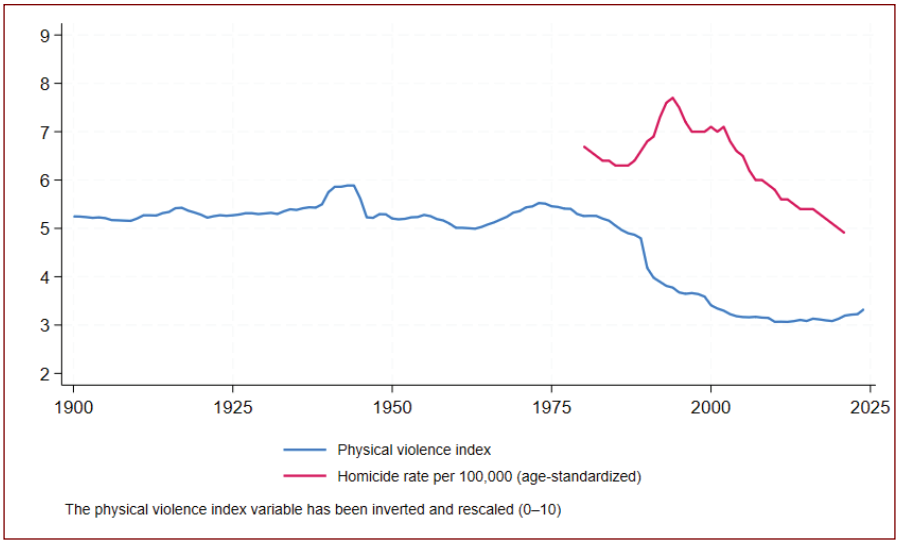

Figure 2: Physical violence index and the homicide rate across the world, 1900–2025.

What about other, non-war related forms of violence? Figure 2 plots the world homicide rate since 1980 and an index of physical violence since 1900.[12] As a long-term comparison, note that the homicide rate in Europe in the year 1250 was on average around 25; today, it is on average between

11 See the review in: Rutar, "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern," 687–692. Note also that Figure 1 does not include deaths due to one-sided conflicts, such as the Rwandan genocide. For a more encompassing measure of violence that includes genocide, see: Davies, Engström, Pettersson, and Öberg, "Organized Violence"; Rutar, "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern," 680, 688.

12 Data sourced from: GBD: Global Burden of Disease. Available at: https://www.healthdata.org/research-analysis/gbd (access: May 2025); V-Dem: Varieties of Democracy Dataset. Available at: https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/ (access: May 2025).

0.5 and one.[13] The global homicide rate in the 1980s and 1990s was around seven, while it has dropped to five in 2023. The fall in global homicides has mostly been driven by the developing world.[14] The physical violence index, which captures the extent to which people are free from government torture and political killings, kept steady at middling levels during the first three quarters of the 20th century, dropping significantly between 1975 and 2000, and remaining much the same thereafter. In these terms, the world is a much safer, less violent place today, compared to even just a few decades ago.

LIVING STANDARDS AND INEQUALITY IN THE TIME OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

A persistent critique of Pinker's narrative of progress, and the New Optimists altogether, is that while relative peace might have been achieved, people's material living standards have at the same time decreased, or at least not improved. While global poverty has fallen with increases in economic development across the world, real disposable income for the typical person, or people at the bottom of the distribution, has – so it is said – unfortunately stagnated. In this reading of events, neoliberal reforms and globalization might have helped with extreme poverty in developing regions, and have massively enriched the top 1%, but they have not benefited the majority of the population, and have instead helped hollow out the middle class.

In fact, this is not the case. Figure 1 plots income decile data from the World Inequality Database (WID).[15] It shows that both the global poor and

13 Eisner, Manuel. "From Swords to Words: Does Macro-Level Change in Self-Control Predict Long-Term Variation in Levels of Homicide?" *Crime and Justice*, 43/1 (2014), 65–134; UNODC: Victims of Intentional Homicide. Available at: https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims (access: May 2025).

14 Rutar, Tibor. "Do Societies with Freer Markets Really Become Less Homicidal over Time? New Evidence from 131 Developed and Developing Societies, 2000–2021." *International Journal of Sociology*, 55/3 (2025), 153–184.

15 WID: World Inequality Database. Available at: https://wid.world/ (access: May 2025).

the global middle class have seen large gains in real disposable income in recent decades. Their absolute living standards have more than doubled, rising by around 150% and 130%, respectively. Other data sources, such as the World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP), show a very similar pattern of substantial growth (exceeding 100%) at the bottom and middle of the distribution since the 1990s.[16]

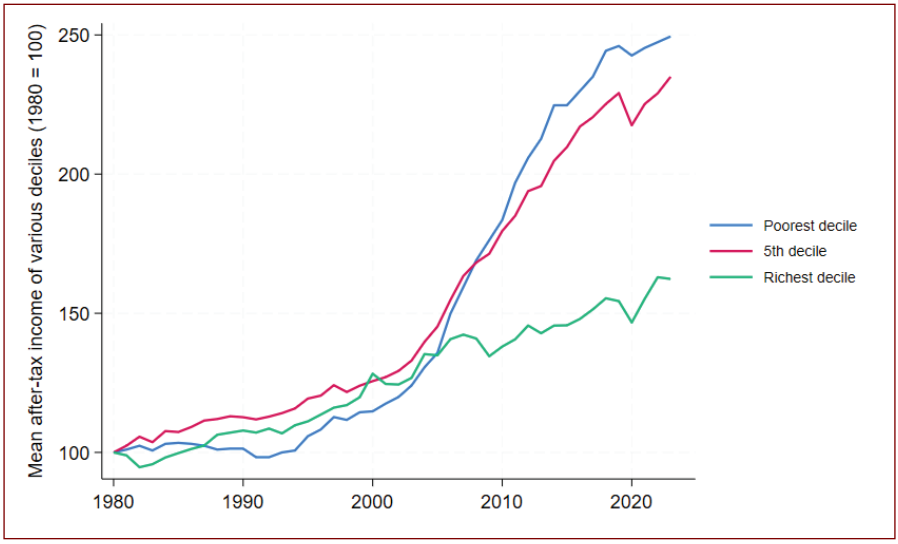

Figure 3: Change in the after-tax, inflation- and purchasing-power parity adjusted mean income within the bottom, middle, and top deciles across the world, 1980–2020.

Has the increase in global living standards across the distribution been driven solely by the developing world, where it is most unambiguously on display?[17] That is, again, not the case. In Europe, the mean income in the bottom decile increased by around 100% between 1980 and 2023, while the fifth decile's income has grown by about 60%. For the United States, the WID documents no increase for the bottom decile between 1980 and 2023, while the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) and World Bank's PIP register a

16 World Bank: Poverty and Inequality Platform. Available at: https://pip.worldbank.org/ (access: May 2025). See also: Garcia, Diana, Nishant Yonzan, and Christoph Lakner. "Income Growth of the Poor Matters for Reducing Global Income Inequality." Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/income-growth-of-the-poor-matters-for-reducing-global-income-ine (access: May 2025).

17 Milanović, Branko. *Capitalism, Alone*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2019.

20% increase.[18] For the fifth decile, all three data sources again converge: they show a 50–60% increase in the United States by 2023, just like in Europe. The data show much the same in both regions if we focus on, say, the second and third, or the seventh and eighth deciles. Claims of broad-based stagnation or hollowing out across the developed (or developing) world are simply unsubstantiated.

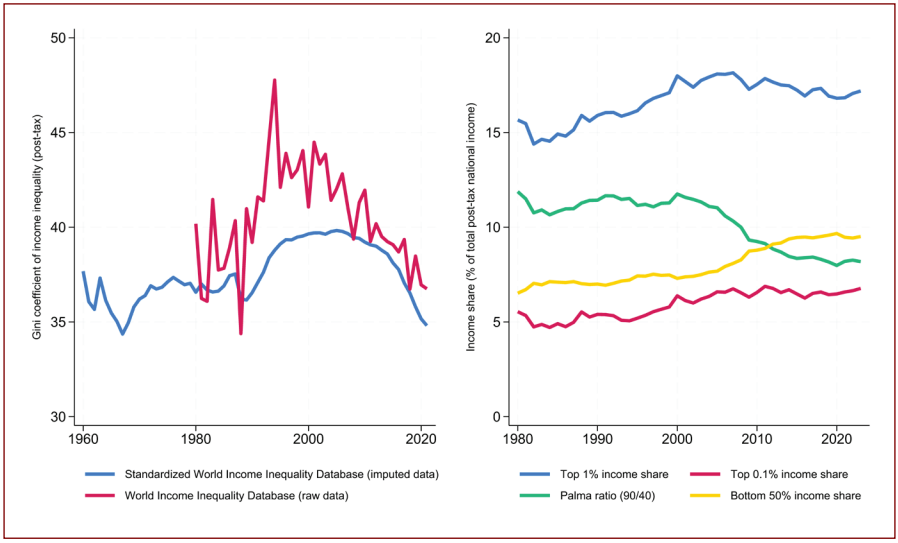

Figure 4: Measures of after-tax income inequality within countries, presented at the world level, 1960–2020 and 1980–2020.

But even if the absolute living standards of the vast majority of the population have been consistently improving in recent decades, have they not gone hand-in-hand with a massive increase in relative deprivation, i.e., inequality? Surprisingly, not at all. Figure 4 presents various measures of post-tax income inequality measured within countries.[19]

18 WID: World Inequality Database; World Bank: Poverty and Inequality; LIS: Luxembourg Income Study Database. Available at: https://www.lisdatacenter.org/our-data/lis-database/ (access: May 2025).

19 Data sourced from: Solt, Frederick. "Measuring Income Inequality Across Countries and Over Time: The Standardized World Income Inequality Database." *Social Science Quarterly*, 101/3 (2020), 1183–1199; UNU-WIDER: World Income Inequality Database. Available at: https://www.wider.unu.edu/project/wiid-world-income-inequality-database (access: May 2025); WID: World Inequality Database.

The first stage of globalization, the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s, saw a sharp uptick in inequality. Be it the Gini coefficient or the income share of the top 1% or 0.1%, inequality undoubtedly rose. However, just as importantly, inequality then stopped increasing in the early 2000s, and even declined thereafter.[20] This is most clearly seen with the Gini coefficient, but the decrease in the Palma ratio (the green line in Figure 4) and the increase in the share of income received by the bottom 50% show much the same. Even the income share of the top 1% has slightly declined since 2000 instead of stagnating or increasing. The same is true if we disaggregate the world average and instead look at the different regions of the world and their within-country inequality (Figure 5).

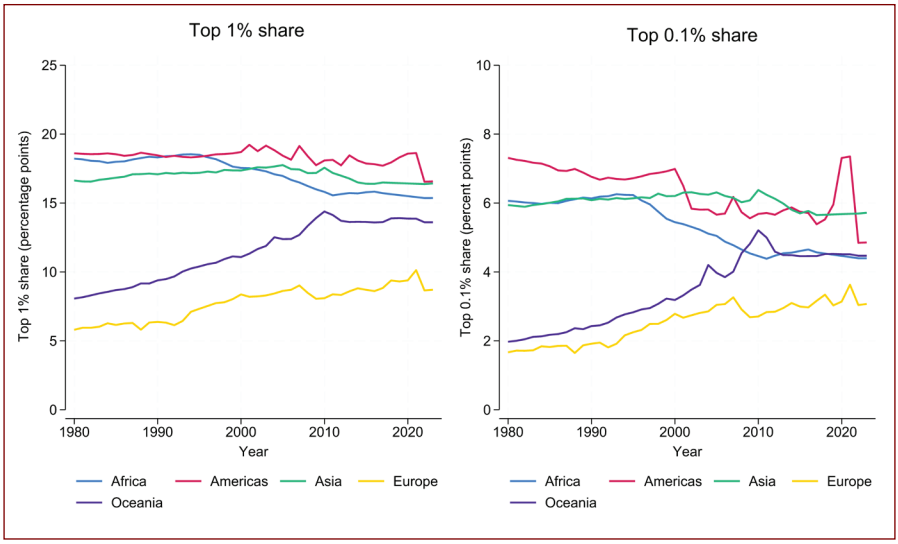

Figure 5: Measures of after-tax income inequality within individual countries, 1980–2020.

20 Clark, Rob. "Income Inequality in the Post-2000 Era: Development, Globalization, and the State." *International Sociology*, 35/3 (2020), 260–283; Rutar, Tibor. "Free-Market Institutions and Income Inequality: Did the Link Persist around the World Even in Times of Falling Within-Country Inequality, 2000–2021?" *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 66/4 (2024), 584–605.

What about inequalities of wealth? Judging by the top 1% net personal wealth within countries, they have been holding steady, not increasing, since the mid-1990s.[21]

Such are the levels and trends of inequality in recent history. But how about a longer-term perspective? Perhaps the pre-capitalist, premodern era exhibited significantly less inequality and is, for that reason, preferable to modernity.

That is not the case. Branko Milanović and co-authors report historical income Ginis for dozens of preindustrial societies.[22] The average is above 40, which is comparable to today's middle-income societies and significantly above the most modern, most capitalist societies today, such as Germany, Sweden, or Britain. Moreover, in certain cases, such as the Roman, Han, and Aztec empires, the top 10%, 5%, or even 1% of earners commanded a much larger share of society's total income than is the case today in the United States.[23]

In terms of wealth inequality, the modern and premodern eras are likewise not that dissimilar. The average wealth Gini for premodern farming societies after 4000 BCE is 0.677, while the average for modern societies in the year 2000 is 0.695. Focusing solely on Europe, the wealth share of the top 10% in 2010 is the same as in the early 1300s, just before the outbreak of the plague known as the Black Death struck.[24]

21 See: Figure 2 in Rutar, Tibor. "What Is Neoliberalism Really? A Global Analysis of Its Real-World Consequences for Development, Inequality, and Democracy." *Social Science Information*, 62/3 (2023), 295–322.

22 Milanović, Branko, Peter H. Lindert, and Jeffrey G. Williamson. "Pre-Industrial Inequality." *The Economic Journal*, 121/551 (2011), 255–272.

23 Alfani, Guido, Michele Bolla, and Walter Scheidel. "A Comparison of Income Inequality in the Roman and Chinese Han Empires." *Nature Communications*, 16/1 (2025), article 3248.

24 Alfani, Guido. "Inequality in History: A Long-Run View." *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 39/2 (2025), 546–566. For developments over the past century, see: Waldenström, Daniel. *Richer and More Equal: A New History of Wealth in the West*. Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024.

THE HISTORICAL PREDICTORS OF DEVELOPMENT

If modernity is synonymous with the various social improvements documented by the New Optimists, what caused the rise of modernity in the first place? A major structural cause proposed by economists, sociologists, and political scientists – endorsed by the New Optimists alongside other more ideational causes – is the appearance of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. More specifically, a set of novel political and economic institutions, or social rules and relations, emerged in the centuries around 1800 that both enabled and incentivized competition, increases in productivity, specialization, and "self-sustaining" modern economic growth. That, in turn, empowered the masses to demand further economic and political reforms, or the general opening-up of society, with the result being a virtuous feedback loop, whereby social reforms shifted the balance of power, and the shifting balance of power spurred additional reforms.[25]

To give a potted history of the dynamic, three crucial points should be underlined.[26] First, what was the trigger that set the transition to capitalism and the Industrial Revolution in motion? As mentioned at the start of the paper, any tendency towards teleology should be resisted here. Whether one privileges a more materialist account, such as the one proposed by the Marxist Robert Brenner and endorsed by contemporary institutionalists like Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, or a more culturalist explanation, like the one recently defended by Joseph Henrich, the initial trigger for modernity was unexpected and not already prefigured in premodern

25 North, Douglass C., John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast. *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Business, 2012; Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019.

26 For a more detailed account, see: Rutar, Tibor. *Rational Choice and Democratic Government: A Sociological Approach*. London: Routledge, 2022; Rutar, Tibor. *Capitalism for Realists: Virtues and Vices of the Modern Economy*. London: Routledge, 2023.

societies.[27] In other words, a radical break or rupture had to occur so that the stable premodern equilibrium fell apart and started giving way to a new, modern social equilibrium. For Brenner and the new institutionalists, sudden, unexpected demographic shocks, such as the Black Death and the diverging reaction of the ruling classes to the attendant social disruption, are key. For Henrich, the peculiar bans and normative strictures of Christianity that were ostensibly suddenly being promoted by the Church between 500 and 1000 CE are more important.

Whatever the case may be, there is widespread agreement that fundamental social structures, institutions, and practices in Europe (or at least certain parts of Europe, such as in England and the Netherlands) witnessed significant – and unpredicted, "exogenous" – changes by around 1400–1600 CE. These changes were mostly related to the dissolution of certain age-old practices and the emergence of very novel forms of behavior. The most significant ones are related to competitive economic exchange, private property, and voluntary mass cooperation with strangers.

Second, who were the social actors behind the transition? As with teleology, simplistic notions of top-down history, or of impersonal social forces acting on their own behalf, should be resisted. Instead, the proximate historical motor behind the changes was various social groups and their everyday – and sometimes revolutionary – struggle. To give an illustrative example, the aftermath of the Black Death left English peasants and laborers emboldened on account of their rising wages and living standards (due to standard Malthusian reasons). In turn, the landed elites in England were faced with a revenue crisis, which they tried to solve by repressing labor. But the masses, on account of their temporarily improved bargaining position, resisted and even pushed further with demands to abolish certain unjust premodern institutions, such as serfdom. In the end, they succeeded. The

27 Brenner, Robert. "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong." In: *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham, 49–111. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*; Henrich, Joseph. *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020.

landed elites were consequently forced to find alternative economic means of reproducing themselves. But given that absolutism – the easiest path to doing so (in lieu of serfdom) – was not as readily available in England as on the continent, they were faced with a conundrum. At the same time, they possessed hundreds of acres of newly unworked land that could be temporarily leased at competitive prices to relatively wealthy peasants. The sudden dissolution of serfdom, the structural absence of absolutism, and the simultaneous (historically contingent) possibility of engaging in competitive leasing of land allowed the English landed elites to unexpectedly stumble upon a key element of the capitalist economy: market competition.[28]

This is just one brief example, and its details should not detain us here. The point is that the political and economic struggle between various social groups (not always necessarily classes) is seen as a key dynamic undergirding the whole process of the transition to modernity. Social structures do not act, people do.

The third important question to ask is: What are the social consequences of the transition from a Malthusian, premodern world to the modern capitalist world of explosive, self-sustaining economic growth? The consequences are large and all-encompassing. Again, broad agreement exists that the unleashing of modern economic growth resulted not only – trivially and tautologically – in the expansion of the economy, but also in a whole host of indirect shifts. For instance, the material living standards and structural capacities of the common people improved massively over the medium and long term as they were being transformed from land-bound rural peasants into mobile urban workers. This encouraged and facilitated the disenfranchised masses to press for further political change, ultimately leading to the creation and expansion of mass liberal democracy and the securing of fundamental human rights. With the masses now politically empowered, the rich could be more heavily taxed, leading to significant

28 Brenner, "Property and Progress," 82–111; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*, 22–50.

reductions in income and wealth inequality over the 20th century, and to the rise of the welfare state.[29]

There are lots of details that could, and should, be filled in to add resolution to this abstract image of modernity. It could, for instance, be asked how colonialism fits in, or how all these considerations relate to the uneven development of certain parts of the world during the 20th century, and more. While a full discussion of these topics lies beyond the scope of this paper, readers are encouraged to consult my published work for a more comprehensive treatment of these issues.[30]

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

As already intimated, economically speaking, some of the key novel social institutions that emerged with modernity revolved around secure property rights, controlling inflation, the rule of law, freedom of trade, and deregulation. Securing private property, abolishing the guilds, abandoning serfdom and slavery, reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and allowing freer enterprise helped generate broad-based and sustained, year-on--year, economic growth. Importantly, this assertion can be corroborated by statistical analysis. Figure 6 presents simple scatterplots of the cross--national relationship between open (or inclusive) economic institutions and economic development since 1850 onwards for a sample of 21 Western societies.[31]

29 Usmani, Adaner. "Democracy and the Class Struggle." *American Journal of Sociology*, 124/3 (2018), 664–704; Kadivar, Mohammad Ali, Adaner Usmani, and Benjamin Bradlow. "The Long March: Deep Democracy in Cross-National Perspective." *Social Forces*, 98/3 (2020), 1311–1338.

30 See: Rutar, "Establishing an Inverted U-Shaped Pattern"; Rutar, "The Rich Get Richer"; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*; Rutar, Tibor. "Re-Examining Extreme Poverty Before and After the Transition to Capitalism, 1300s–1900s: The Issue of Definition, Periodization, Measurement, and Causal Responsibility." *International Review of Sociology*, 34/2 (2024), 300–334.

31 Data sourced from: de la Escosura, Leandro Prados. "Historical Index of Economic Freedom (HIEL)." Available at: https://frdelpino.es/investigacion/en_gb/world-economy/global-economic-freedom/ (access: May 2025); Bolt, Jutta, and Jan Luiten Van Zanden. "Maddison-Style Estimates of the Evolution of the World Economy: A New 2023 Update." *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 39/2 (2025), 631–671.

As a more fine-grained analysis, Table 1 reports multivariate fixed-effects panel regressions with lagged economic freedom (measured with the Historical Index of Economic Liberty) as the main predictor and GDP per capita as the outcome variable. The time-period extends from the 1850s up to the present day. Here, I am not simply cross-sectionally estimating whether countries with more economic freedom are also richer. Rather, I am analyzing whether increases in economic freedom over time (within each country) correlate with over-time increases in GDP per capita (again, within each country). A significant upside to such panel models is that, even though they cannot firmly establish causality, they partial out any unobserved, time-invariant confounders or factors that differ across countries, and thus a crucial source of bias is controlled for.[32]

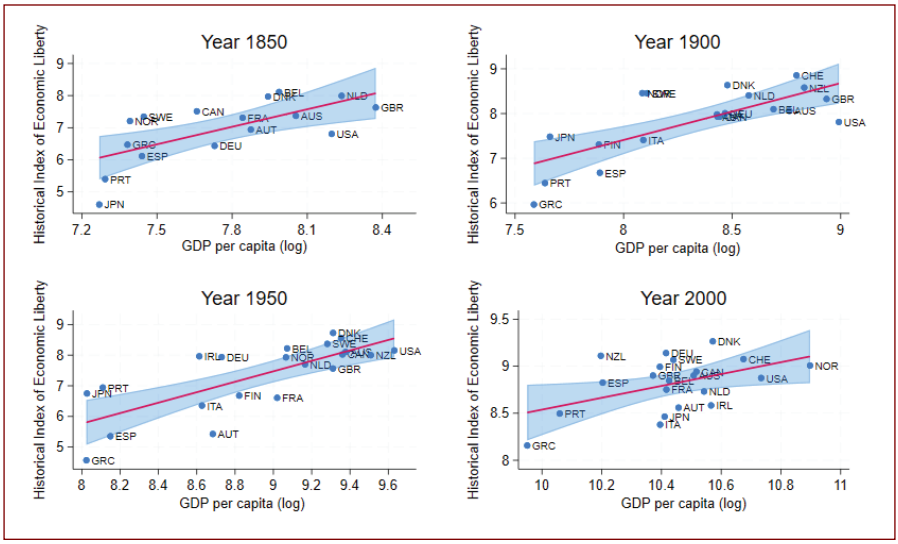

Figure 6: Bivariate correlation between economic freedom and GDP per capita, 1850–2000.

Model 1 first replicates the already mentioned bivariate relationship. Absent controls for temporal variation, economic freedom and economic development are statistically significantly and strongly related. A one-point

32 Cunningham, Scott. *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021.

increase in economic freedom (on a 0–10 scale) over time predicts an 89% increase in GDP per capita. This simple, bivariate relationship is of course mostly correlational and not indicative of causation, as other relevant confounders that change over time, such as democracy or violence, have not yet been introduced into the analysis.

Models 2 and 3 show how the relationship changes and shrinks once time-varying controls are implemented.[33] The fully specified Model 3 is more indicative of potential causal relationships, albeit even here reverse causality (GDP per capita → economic freedom) is likely biasing the estimate to some extent, as economic freedom and economic development are mutually reinforcing phenomena. Importantly, though, omitted-variable bias is not likely. Various formal regression sensitivity tests show that, in the present case, time-varying unobserved confounders would have to be between 42% and 157% as strong as my included controls for the relationship between economic freedom and development to become statistically non-significant.[34] Such strong residual confounding is not likely, because most factors of development are already accounted for in the fully specified Model 3: its total within-R2 is 0.88, meaning almost all the variance is already explained.

If the relationship from Model 3 were to be interpreted as causal, it would suggest that a one-point increase in economic freedom results in GDP per capita being 12% higher.

As an additional test, I specified a model that explicitly controls for state capacity as a possible confounder.[35] Model 4 in Table 1 shows that even when we partial out the effect of state capacity – measured through a

33 Data sourced from: V-Dem: Varieties of Democracy.

34 Both numerical estimates are based, respectively, on tests created by: Diegert, Paul, Matthew A. Masten, and Alexandre Poirier. "arXiv: Assessing Omitted Variable Bias When the Controls Are Endogenous." Available at: https://arxiv.org/abs/2206.02303 (access: May 2025); Oster, Emily. "Unobservable Selection and Coefficient Stability: Theory and Evidence." *Journal of Business & Economic Statistics,* 37/2 (2019), 187–204.

35 Data sourced from: O'Reilly, Colin, and Ryan H. Murphy. "An Index Measuring State Capacity, 1789–2019." *Economica*, 89/355 (2022), 713–745.

comprehensive index that includes data on state authority over a territory, public administration, particularistic or public goods, state fiscal source of revenue, and educational equality – the coefficient on economic freedom remains statistically significant, positive, and sizable.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Historical Index of Economic Liberty	0.636***	0.0802	0.117***	0.109***
	(0.148)	(0.0563)	(0.0267)	(0.0217)
Liberal democracy		3.336***	1.175***	0.371+
		(0.204)	(0.274)	(0.209)
Share of urban population			0.444***	0.492***
			(0.0403)	(0.0665)
Civil society participation (women)			1.401***	1.637***
			(0.123)	(0.143)
Physical violence index			-0.816***	-0.971***
			(0.171)	(0.160)
Clientelism index			0.157	0.0680
			(0.114)	(0.191)
State capacity (comprehensive)				0.123***
				(0.0443)
Constant	4.145***	6.729***	3.961***	3.871***
	(1.151)	(0.431)	(0.297)	(0.516)
Observations	**3300**	**3281**	**2736**	**1821**

Driscoll-Kraay standard errors in parentheses.
All independent variables lagged by five years.
*+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001*

Table 1: Fixed-effects panel regressions with GDP per capita as the dependent variable; unstandardized coefficients.

In unreported regressions, I also used a different panel estimator: the pooled mean-group estimator with autoregressive distributed lag. The results were in line with those presented in Table 1, suggesting that higher economic freedom is linked to higher long-run income levels and that economic freedom reforms generate a short-run growth bump.

Additionally, I performed several robustness checks to test the sensitivity of the main result. Figure 7 presents the coefficients on economic freedom from these additional tests, where I varied the lag period of independent variables (10 and two years, respectively), constrained the sample temporally in different ways, and estimated both standard errors and coefficients. It shows that the positive correlation between economic freedom and GDP per capita is mostly robust and of a similar size to the one uncovered by the main regression model.

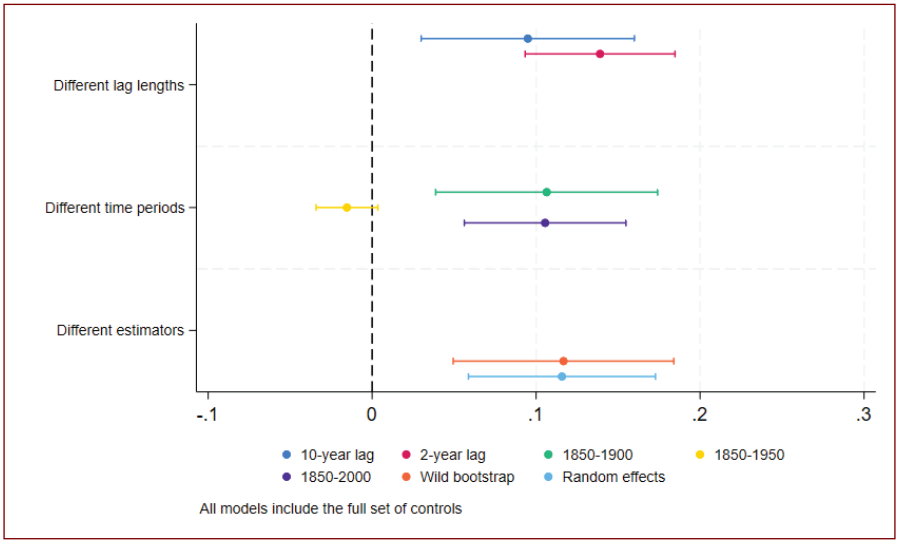

Figure 7: Coefficient plot of various robustness checks.

Lastly, relying on the disaggregated index of economic freedom, I was able to corroborate the claim that secure property rights, the rule of law, and open and free international trade are related to improved economic

development. However, I find no evidence that deregulation positively predicts development. Instead, deregulation seems to harm development.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this paper supports a "weak," non-teleological notion of progress: when modern liberal institutions take root, they tend – on balance and over time – to broaden human flourishing. The long arc of violence has not bent smoothly downward, but the data show that today's world is markedly less murderous than both the agrarian past and most of the 20th century. While recent wars are a cause for concern, it is still too early to tell whether they constitute any significant reversal of the long-term trend. Homicide rates as well as state violence indices continue their post-1970s decline. Materially, the gains are even clearer. Real after-tax incomes have risen sharply for the bottom half of the global distribution, extreme poverty has plummeted, and the feared "hollowing-out" of the middle class finds little empirical support outside a few isolated series. Inequality did widen during the first wave of neoliberal globalization. But it then plateaued or even eased after 2000, and both income and wealth disparities today are comparable to – or below – those of many pre-industrial societies.

Crucially, the paper's panel analyses indicate that these advances are not unpredictable and completely contingent. Expansions in economic freedom, secure property rights, the rule of law, free trade, and participatory democracy are consistently associated with subsequent growth in GDP per capita, even after controlling for a battery of confounders. In line with the narrative propounded by the New Optimists, progress emerges where open economic and political institutions, including state capacity, create incentives for innovation and growth, discipline predation, and empower citizens to press for further social reforms.

None of these considerations imply inevitability. Progress can stall or reverse when those institutions erode, when complacency allows new forms of exploitation, or when existential challenges – such as climate

change, authoritarian resurgence, and disruptive technologies – outpace our adaptive capacity.

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POVZETEK

Steven Pinker in drugi t. i. »novi optimisti« trdijo, da je prehod iz predmodernih družb v kapitalistično modernost v zadnjih stoletjih prinesel velik in trajen zgodovinski napredek človeštva. Skeptiki ostajajo zadržani iz različnih teoretičnih in empiričnih razlogov. Kot poudarjajo, je treba na napredek gledati s kritično distanco, saj gre za pojem, ki je pogosto obremenjen s teleologijo, linearno predstavo razvoja, kulturno diskriminacijo in podobnim. Kritiki prav tako izpostavljajo, da so z empiričnega vidika sodobne kapitalistične družbe morda res bogatejše kot družbe v preteklosti, vendar pa je cena za razcvet bogastva ponovni porast nasilja in nebrzdana rast velikih družbenih neenakosti.

Članek predstavlja novejše longitudinalne podatke o tej problematiki in pokaže, da so najpogostejše kritike napredka večinoma zmotne. Čeprav so podatki o nasilju zapleteni in večdimenzionalni, je svet na splošno varnejši, kot je bil v predmodernih časih. Revnejši sloji so bili deležni pomembnih izboljšav življenjskega standarda v moderni dobi nasploh in še posebej v zadnjih nekaj desetletjih. Neenakost se je v prvi fazi neoliberalne globalizacije dejansko povečala, vendar se je nato ustalila in od okoli leta 2005 celo nekoliko zmanjšala. Prav tako je mogoče pokazati, da so ti trendi močno povezani s sodobnimi institucijami, kot so varne lastninske pravice, prosti trgi, demokratični politični sistemi in z močno socialno državo.

Članek sklene misel, da je mogoče v veliki meri soglašati z novimi optimisti, ki trdijo, da je modernost – in še posebej inkluzivne politične in gospodarske institucije kot ključni stebri modernosti – povezana z znatnim napredkom. To pa ne pomeni, da je napredek nujen ali neizbežen, saj se lahko ustavi, kadar liberalne institucije oslabijo ali kadar novi izzivi, kot je globalno segrevanje, presežejo naše prilagoditvene zmožnosti.

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Historical Materialism and Progress

Historični materializem in napredek

Robin Dolar

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the concept of progress through an examination of different paradigms in the natural and social sciences. By considering how progress relates to various theoretical frameworks, it analyzes the distinction between teleology and evolution; scientific attempts to reconstruct a theory of history; definitions of capitalism that imply continuous and discontinuous conceptions of historical development; and different perspectives on premodern and modern institutions. The discussion concludes by outlining the implications these concepts hold for understanding modernity and progress. In doing so, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced account of how progress is portrayed in contemporary academic literature.

Keywords

progress, modernity, capitalism, historical materialism, New Institutional Economics

IZVLEČEK

Članek obravnava pojem napredka v okvirih analize različnih paradigem v naravoslovju in družboslovju. Preučevanje odnosa med napredkom in različnimi teoretskimi okviri izpostavi razliko med teleologijo in evolucijo; znanstvene poskuse rekonstruiranja teorije zgodovine; definicije kapitalizma s kontinuiranimi in diskontinuiranimi razvojnimi zasnovami; ter raznolika razumevanja predmodernih in modernih institucij. Razprava sklene z orisom implikacij, ki jih ti koncepti vnašajo v razumevanje modernosti in napredka. S tem prispevek pomaga oblikovati večplastno sliko napredka, kot se ta pojavlja v sodobni znanstveni literaturi.

Ključne besede

napredek, modernost, kapitalizem, historični materializem, nova institucionalna ekonomija

INTRODUCTION: A THEORY OF PROGRESS?

The study of human societies is deeply entangled with the concept of progress. History, sociology, political science, and philosophy all shape – and are shaped by – assumptions about how societies change, what counts as improvement or decline, and whether human development follows any discernible direction. Even when scholars in these fields do not overtly frame their analyses in these terms, their work often carries clear implications for how progress is interpreted.

Moreover, a survey of intellectual history reveals that many influential thinkers have explicitly positioned themselves either in favor of progress or in opposition to it. Reflections on the possibility and meaning of improving the human condition have been part of intellectual debate since antiquity, even if they were framed differently from how we understand progress in modernity.[1] The salience of these issues has persisted into the 21st century, with several scholars becoming associated with renewed defenses of progress and its contemporary significance. In addition to emphasizing the achievements of modernity, these authors also criticize what they describe as "progressophobia" among other intellectuals.[2] Progress, therefore, remains a recurring theme in academic discourse.

However, these historical and contemporary uses of the notion of progress do not amount to a scientific theory in any strict sense. They do not form a coherent framework with clearly defined concepts or methodological commitments that would distinguish them from other approaches. In this respect, there is no such thing as a "theory of progress."

1 Nisbet, Robert. *History of the Idea of Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

2 Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011; Pinker, Steven. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Ridley, Matt. *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2011; Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018.

The absence of such a theory complicates a systematic approach to issues surrounding progress. Accordingly, this paper approaches the concept of progress indirectly, by analyzing the assumptions embedded in frameworks with clear theoretical structures. The article thus draws on various paradigms in the natural and social sciences to compare their accounts of historical development and modernity. The purpose of these comparisons is to provide a clearer sense of what different perspectives imply for the meaning and viability of progress.

The frameworks that will be considered are classical historical materialism, Darwinian evolution, Analytical Marxism, Political Marxism, and New Institutional Economics. The discussion moves from addressing various aspects of long-term historical developments to examining different views of modern institutions. While the implications of these views for the nature of progress are suggested throughout, they are brought together more fully in the final part of the article. The conclusion thus attempts to provide an explicit assessment of progress and modernity.

THE MARXIST THEORY OF HISTORY

A convenient starting point for examining the concept of progress as it relates to the social sciences is to consider Karl Marx's theory of history. Among the figures that sought to make sense of the economic and political transformations of the 19th century, Marx articulated arguably the most influential theory of how societies develop and transform over time.[3] In other words, he offered a general theory of history, one that links the dynamics of social reproduction to the mechanisms of historical change. The classical formulation of this theory is most clearly expressed in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a short text that outlines the conceptual core of historical materialism.[4] It is useful to consider

3 For a discussion of classical sociological authors, see: Giddens, Anthony. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

4 Marx, Karl. "'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*." Trans. Terrell Carver. In: *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver, 158–162. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

a longer passage from this work, which will serve as the basis for the discussion that follows.

> In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. [...] At a certain level of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the already existing relations of production, or in what is merely a legal expression for this, with the property relations within which they had previously functioned. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution commences. [...] In broad outline Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic development of society.[5]

This passage can be interpreted as containing a tripartite framework of analysis. The first element is the "forces of production," which are the material means and technical capacities through which societies produce their livelihoods. These include the instruments of labor, such as tools, machinery, land, and technology, as well as the knowledge and skills required to use them. The second element is the "relations of production," which are the social organization of that productive activity, that is, the relations between those who work and those who control the conditions of work. In feudalism, these relations took the form of lords and peasants; in capitalism, they take the form of capitalists and workers. Finally, the third element is the "superstructure," which refers to the legal, political, and ideological institutions that arise on the basis of the underlying economic conditions. Simply put, while the forces and relations of production constitute the material

5 *Ibid.*, 159–160.

base of society, the superstructure is an expression of this base in the form of ideas, norms, and institutions.[6]

The quoted passage also includes a theory of social and historical change. The reason is that the development of the forces of production constrains the possible relations of production that are connected to it. As long as social relations are conducive to the further advancement of productive technology, the system remains stable. But once the existing relations of production constrain rather than enable further growth of productive forces – once they become "fetters" on growth – a period of social revolution begins. When the contradiction between them becomes acute, it leads to the transformation of both the economic base and the superstructure built upon it. The result is the reconstitution of society's fundamental structure.

It is not hard to see how the presented framework can be interpreted as a sequential or a "stagist" view of human history. Marx himself identifies several broad epochs in the quoted passage: the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production, which correspond to historical periods. This line of thought was later picked up by his successors and developed into the famous schema of historical stages: primitive communism, ancient slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and finally socialism and communism as the projected culmination.[7] This interpretation represents an all-encompassing theory of historical progression that sought not only to interpret the world, but also to guide political practice within it. Progress – in the sense of the development of the forces and relations of production – is ingrained in human history.

6 For a comprehensive discussion of this framework, see: Cohen, G.A. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Exp. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

7 *Ibid.*, 197–215.

TELEOLOGY AND EVOLUTION

One important distinction that can be drawn from the discussed formulation is that between a teleological and an evolutionary account of change. As the charge of teleology is one of the most common objections to the notion of progress, it is important to address it directly.

A teleological conception presupposes that historical development moves toward a predetermined goal, or "telos." History is not an arbitrary succession of events, but a purposeful sequence oriented toward an ultimate end. The Christian understanding of temporality represents an example of this conception: it follows a linear structure in which the decisive events are the creation of the world, the coming of Christ, and the final judgment. It is important to note that this view does not necessarily deny the significance of other developments, such as the rise and fall of empires, but these developments ultimately remain subordinate to God's divine plan. Regardless of what is happening in the realm of human affairs, history is marching toward the Apocalypse.[8]

It should be clear that the Marxist theory of history can be read as teleological. If we draw the parallel with Christianity, we can say that the Christian sequence of sacred events is replaced by a sequence of social forms through which societies advance, with both frameworks projecting this logic into the future. The two conceptions are not the same, of course, as Marxism locates the agent of historical change in social actors rather than in divine will. However, according to this reading, both frameworks share a structural similarity in viewing development as directed toward an inevitable end. It can therefore be argued that while the substance of

8 This is a simplified description of the Christian temporal framework. For a more comprehensive account, see: Koselleck, Reinhart. "Is there an Acceleration of History?" Trans. James Ingram. In: *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, eds. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, 113–134. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009, 128–134; Pomian, Krzysztof. *Red časa*. Trans. Vera Troha. Ljubljana: Krtina, 2010, 55–60.

Christian eschatology and historical materialism may be significantly different, their formal logic remains comparable.[9]

The claim that a developmental sequence possesses structure and direction does not, however, necessarily entail a teleological interpretation. In addition to the birth of the social sciences, the 19th century also witnessed one of the most significant revolutions in the natural sciences, namely the theory of evolution. The broad impact of this theory can be seen in the fact that Marx admired Darwin's work and even sent him a copy of *Capital*, seeing in Darwin's theory a partial analogue to his own conception of historical development.[10]

The theory of evolution, in its basic structure, rests on two central components. The first is random genetic mutation, which refers to the spontaneous changes of genes that produce the diversity of species. It is important to note that this idea was misused to promote racist theories about human genetics which have, of course, been thoroughly discredited by contemporary science.[11] More relevant to the present discussion is the second component, natural selection. This concept refers to the process by which certain traits become more common in a population because they confer an advantage in survival and reproduction within a given environment. Giraffes have long necks not because of chance or destiny, but because that trait happened to be beneficial for their reproduction. In other words, the evolutionary process works as a mechanism of animal adaptation to environmental conditions, which shapes the development of species over long periods of time.[12]

9 The teleological aspects of theories of history have been noted by many authors. For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see: Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

10 Cohen, Bernard J. *Revolution in Science*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985, 344–345.

11 Rutherford, Adam. *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022; Rutherford, Adam. *How to Argue with a Racist: History, Science, Race and Reality*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020.

12 Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 291–294.

If we connect this description to our discussion, we can say that an evolutionary framework differs from a teleological one in multiple respects. First, the theory of evolution posits a general tendency in the evolution of animals, not a predetermined sequence with a clear goal. That is to say, while the process follows discernible patterns of adaptation, it remains open-ended rather than oriented toward any fixed or final goal. Second, the structure of development is explained through a functional mechanism: traits endure not because they were designed for a purpose, but because they represent advantages for survival and reproduction. The framework therefore includes an internal "motor" that accounts for the direction of development.[13]

In addition to its theoretical foundations, the empirical grounding of evolutionary theory should also be emphasized. It is worth noting that certain elements of this theory were put forward by thinkers before Darwin's publication of his findings (in less systematic terms, of course). However, it is one thing to suggest certain ideas in a general sense, and another to provide sufficient evidence to make them plausible. What distinguished Darwin's contribution was not only its conceptual rigor, but also the extensive body of evidence collected through decades of observation across South America. *The Origin of Species* stands apart because it united a coherent theoretical framework with empirical substance.[14]

The example of Darwinian evolution demonstrates that a theory of development can be scientifically grounded. Such a theory is going to be plausible if it proposes a general tendency of development rather than a clearly defined goal; it has to be explained by a causal mechanism; and it has to be supported by empirical evidence.

13 For a discussion of the relevance of Darwinian evolution for theories of history, see: Wright, Erik Olin, Andrew Levine, and Elliott Sober. *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History*. London and New York: Verso, 1992, 47–60.

14 Cohen, R*evolution in Science*, 291–292.

A SCIENTIFIC THEORY OF HUMAN HISTORY?

The significance of Darwinian theory was recognized not only by Marx himself, but also by later historical materialists. Within the Marxist tradition, the school of thought known as "Analytical Marxism" explicitly embraces a methodological outlook of the kind usually associated with the natural sciences. Drawing on the broader distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, the main idea of this paradigm is to articulate Marx's premises with conceptual precision and to test whether its empirical claims stand up to the historical record. Simply put, historical materialism has to be tested in the same way as any other scientific theory.[15] While one may question whether this strand of Marxism represents a distinct epistemological orientation, its substantive propositions are relevant in the context of discussing the concept of progress.

The most influential representative of Analytical Marxism is G.A. Cohen, whose 1978 work *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* aimed to reconstruct Marx's classical formulation of historical materialism in systematic form.[16] This reconstruction consists of two central components. The first is the "development thesis," which holds that history is characterized by a continual development of productive forces. The basic reason for this tendency is that humans seek to avoid strenuous work, which is why they are driven to create technologies that make work easier, which leads to cumulative technological improvement over time. The second component is the "primacy thesis," which holds that relations of production are sustained only insofar as they facilitate the development of productive forces. As already discussed, the idea here is that social relations endure only if they support the expansion of productive capacity, and not if they represent "fetters" to that development. Taken together, these two theses suggest that human history sees a tendency toward the development of technology and a corresponding evolution of societies.[17]

15 Wright, Erik Olin. *Interrogating Inequality: Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism, and Marxism*. London and New York: Verso Books, 1994, 178–198.

16 Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.

17 *Ibid.*, 28–62, 134–174; Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 13–46.

Cohen's defense of Marx opened up a wider research program that was at least partially influenced by evolutionary theory. It is worth noting that the presented reconstruction contains the idea of a historical tendency and (the aim of) a clear causal explanation, but it does not necessarily hold to the notion of an ultimate end to which history is destined to move. This framework is thus closer to an evolutionary rather than a teleological conception. It should not be surprising, then, that the debate following Cohen's publication primarily focused on adducing a mechanism by which the forces of production select the relations of production. Without this element, the theory lacked the "motor" that explains the direction of change. In other words, historical materialism required a mechanism for the development of social relations that functioned in a manner analogous to natural selection in the evolution of species.[18]

Alan Carling was one of the authors who responded to this challenge by proposing competition between societies, most importantly military conflict, as the missing selection mechanism. His core argument was that different types of societies consistently fight wars with one another, and those with more advanced productive forces and social relations tend to prevail. In parallel with how certain types of animals persist because of natural selection, certain types of societies endure due to geopolitical competition. The example Carling used was the spread of capitalism: capitalist societies are significantly more productive than pre-capitalist societies, which is why they have a structural advantage in military conflict, which is how capitalism spread around the world.[19] This solution makes canonical historical materialism an internally coherent theory.

However, Carling's proposal is also limited in a very significant way: it only works for the part of history in which capitalism exists. It is true that the economic productiveness of capitalist societies translates into a sustained advantage in geopolitical competition, as witnessed in the history of the

18 Chibber, Vivek. "What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History." *Historical Materialism*, 19/2 (2011), 71–73.

19 Carling, Alan. "Analytical Marxism and Historical Materialism: The Debate on Social Evolution." *Science & Society*, 57/1 (1993), 44–56.

19th and 20th centuries. But the differences in the economic capabilities of pre-capitalist societies were not large enough to result in a consistent military advantage based on productivity. Wars in premodern times were largely decided by other factors, such as strategic capabilities, ideology, or contingency.[20] This is why different types of societies, such as hunter-gatherer societies, empires (of various kinds), feudal monarchies, etc., coexisted for most of human history. Simply put, there was no one dominant type of society in premodernity in the same sense as there is a dominant type of society in modernity.[21] While Carling's model captures an essential dynamic of the modern world, it thus does not extend to earlier epochs.

The debates surrounding canonical historical materialism included many other developments that will not be explored here. It is worth briefly noting, however, that the Marxist scholar Vivek Chibber's 2011 article "What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Marxist Theory of History" can be viewed as a kind of post-mortem on this debate. One important argument that Chibber highlights is that the correct way to think about technology in history is not as a tendency of constant development, but as a tendency toward non-regression. The latter is a much weaker claim, essentially conveying the notion that technological regressions are the exceptions in human history because social actors have the incentive to keep the level of technological development at least intact. This view is consistent with long periods of economic stagnation, which is in fact what characterizes human history. On the whole, Chibber concludes that the debate's outcome does not support the canonical interpretation of historical materialism.[22]

It is important to recognize the nuances of the arguments presented here. There is, in fact, an observable asymmetry in the history of technology. When one considers technological change from prehistoric tools to the 21st century, it is evident that regression is far less common than the maintenance or enhancement of existing levels of productive capacity. It

20 Chibber, "What Is Living," 73–78.

21 Giddens, Anthony. *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Vol. 1, *Power, Property, and the State*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1981, 168–169.

22 Chibber, "What Is Living," 80–90.

is also true that capitalism became the globally dominant type of society largely because of its advantages in military conflict. Both of these claims represent non-teleological, scientifically valid, and empirically grounded accounts of development. In certain important aspects, then, the reconstruction of canonical historical materialism was productive.

However, the point to emphasize is that these trends do not represent the main story for most of human history. The central fact of economic life for millennia was relative stagnation, not a tendency toward development. Sustained economic growth and the corresponding military advantage is specific only to the past few centuries and represents a *discontinuity* with previous historical eras. Progress – again, understood here in the sense of the development of the forces of production and the related changes in the relations of production – is a modern phenomenon. The explanation for these historical patterns should therefore be one that emphasizes the uniqueness of capitalism, not one that works for all societies and all eras of history.

MARKET OPPORTUNITIES AND MARKET IMPERATIVES

The specificity of capitalism is precisely what other schools of historical sociology have emphasized. Roughly at the same time as Analytical Marxists were arguing over the theory of history, a school named "Political Marxism" emerged. This name comes from a critic of the paradigm, who complained that the typical Marxist focus on the forces of production was substantially revised or even abandoned. The criticism was then adopted by the social theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood with the argument that politics always plays a central role in social formations and the manner of surplus extraction. Hence the term Political Marxism took hold, even if many practitioners of the paradigm are skeptical of its use.[23]

23 For general introductions to this paradigm, see: Lafrance, Xavier, and Charles Post. "Introduction." In: *Case Studies in the Origins of Capitalism*, eds. Xavier Lafrance and Charles Post, 1–38. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Rutar, Tibor. *Od klasične sociologije k mednarodni historični sociologiji: izvori in narava modernosti.* Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2017, 53–77.

One of the main contributions of this strand of Marxism is in providing a precise definition of capitalism. Most traditional approaches to this question – such as those of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein – see a clear association between capitalism and certain types of market exchange.[24] The problem with this view is that various forms of commercial activity, often generating significant profits, have existed for millennia without producing the imperatives or the outcomes of modern markets. Political Marxists, on the other hand, understand capitalism as a distinct type of society which is historically recent and represents a qualitative break with previous social forms. Since this is the main paradigm this article seeks to defend, it is worth briefly outlining how it understands societal types and the role of markets.

The basic concept through which societies are understood is "social property relations." These relations determine the access of social actors to land, tools, work, and the social product itself. Societies are essentially viewed as different ways of dividing property among social actors.[25] At the most general level of analysis, we can distinguish between three basic types of societies.

Pre-class societies, such as various kinds of hunter-gatherer communities, agrarian villages, as well as "chiefdoms," are defined by the lack of structural inequality in the distribution of material resources. Apart from the fact that this category includes many different types of social relations, it is important to note that complex phenomena such as monumental architecture, trade, and even the creation of cities all existed in early human contexts. Traditional assumptions about the primitive nature of prehistoric societies are therefore misleading. What sets pre-class societies apart is

24 Braudel, Fernand. *Dinamika kapitalizma.* Trans. Gregor Moder. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2010; Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

25 Brenner, Robert. "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong." In: *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham, 49–111. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 57–59.

that they are not characterized by a structural asymmetry of power that stems from an unequal distribution of property.[26]

Pre-capitalist societies are defined by (1) the lower class having access to the means of subsistence, and (2) the upper class having direct control of the means of coercion.[27] These characteristics are most easily explained by considering feudal social relations, which are often used as a template to describe various kinds of pre-capitalist class societies. In feudal societies, peasants possess the material resources they need to survive and are therefore not dependent on the market. Most of what they produce is for use, not exchange. Medieval lords, on the other hand, possess the armed power they need to subordinate the peasants. This gives them the ability to extract surplus "extra-economically," which is to say that they take part of what peasants have produced independently. Simply put, the basic structure of pre-capitalist societies is defined by the fact that military superiority enables lords to extract surplus from subsistence peasants.[28]

The market represents an important, but structurally limited part of these kinds of societies. Several distinct features should be emphasized here. First, pre-capitalist markets should primarily be viewed as opportunities that social actors can take advantage of, not as imperatives that they need to follow. Peasants, lords, and merchants generally use markets when it benefits them, not because they are forced to do so. Second, pre--capitalist markets are based on "privileges," that is, political designations determining that only certain groups of social actors have the possibility of long-distance trade and manufacture production. Medieval merchants and manufacturers operate based on privileges given to them by political authority, which (crucially) shields them from economic competition. Third, the gains that are made on the market are generally not invested

26 For characterizations of pre-class societies, see: Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique*, vol. 1, 160–162; Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Allen Lane, 2021; Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 1, *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*. New ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 34–72.

27 Brenner, "Property and Progress," 63–66.

28 *Ibid.*, 61–66.

in the sphere of production. Lords and merchants mostly do not use their surplus to improve farming tools and techniques, but largely use it to buy military equipment and for luxury consumption (such as buying expensive food, clothing, etc.). Pre-capitalist markets, therefore, primarily represent opportunity; they are based on political privileges; and they do not inherently lead to systematic improvements in economic productivity.[29]

Capitalist societies are radically different from pre-capitalist societies in many central respects. They are defined by (1) the lower class not having access to the means of subsistence, and (2) the upper class not having direct control over the means of coercion.[30] Workers in capitalism do not possess the material resources they need to survive and are consequently dependent on the market. Capitalists do not have the ability to extract surplus by the direct use of force, since the state holds a monopoly on the means of violence. Importantly, this enables the capitalist state to protect private property, which represents a core tenet of capitalism. The extraction of surplus in these conditions occurs "economically," as part of the production process itself. The basic idea here is that the wage that workers get paid is not a direct expression of the value they produce during working time. In other words, economic surplus extraction is essentially represented by the difference between the value that workers produce and the wage they get in return.[31]

The market is an all-encompassing part of capitalist societies with the following distinct features. First, since social actors in capitalism do not have the ability to sustain themselves by making the products and pro-

29 For characterizations of the pre-capitalist market sphere, see: *ibid*., 72–82; Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London and New York: Verso, 2017, 73–94; Gerstenberger, Heide. *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State*. Trans. David Fernbach. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007, 632–662.

30 Brenner, "Property and Progress," 60–62.

31 It is important to note that explaining economic surplus extraction does not require commitment to the labor theory of value. For a brief overview of how this subject is understood in mainstream paradigms, see: Rutar, Tibor. *Capitalism for Realists: Virtues and Vices of the Modern Economy*. London: Routledge, 2023, 61–69. For a contemporary defense of the labor theory of value, see: Heinrich, Michael. *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*. Trans. Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012, 39–98.

duce they need, they are dependent on the market to survive. Markets in capitalism should thus primarily be viewed not as an opportunity, but as an imperative or a compulsion. Second, capitalist markets are, in general terms, characterized by economic competition. While monopolies exist in capitalism, they are a result of the capitalist production process itself and therefore structurally different from pre-capitalist political monopolies. Finally, the fact that markets are competitive puts pressure on capitalists to economize on production or risk being driven out of the market. This is why capitalist firms constantly invest their profits in developing new technology that raises productivity in order to outcompete their rivals. Capitalist markets, therefore, primarily represent imperatives; they are competitive; and they incentivize constant investment in the sphere of production, leading to economic growth.[32]

The way that Political Marxists view capitalism is thus as a whole set of social property relations in which markets have a specific character. Traditional accounts of capitalism do not sufficiently recognize the differences between pre-capitalist and capitalist markets in what they represent to social actors, in the internal logic of how they operate, and in the outcomes they produce. If there is one simple phrase that captures the essence of capitalism, it is "market dependence."

The account presented here also entails a reconceptualization of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. If one associates capitalism with market exchange, then it can be assumed that the market only needed to spread over time or that premodern merchants brought about the transition to a commercial society.[33] But if one views capitalism as a distinct set of social institutions, then the question of how those institutions initially emerged poses a significant conceptual challenge. How did

32 For characterizations of the economic sphere in capitalism, see: Chibber, Vivek. *Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It.* London and New York: Verso, 2022, 5–50; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 99–129; Krašovec, Primož. *Tujost kapitala.* Ljubljana: Sophia, 2021, 20–40.

33 The latter interpretation is aligned with the classical conception of the "Bourgeois Revolution." However, this framework has been thoroughly criticized by contemporary scholarship. See: Comninel, George C. *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge.* London and New York: Verso, 1987, 5–52.

we get to the historically unprecedented situation in which most people are dependent on the market? The answer to this challenge is provided by the founder of Political Marxism, Robert Brenner. Without going into details here, the main point is that capitalism emerged as an *unintended* consequence of class struggle because of specific historical circumstances. This occurred in England in the wake of the Black Death, the result of which was that a significant number of social actors became dependent on the market and started to follow the capitalist logic of specialization, profit maximization, and the constant investment in new technologies. The emergence of capitalism, then, is essentially understood as a contingent event, a historical accident.[34]

If we put what has been discussed thus far together, we get a clear picture of human history. The predominant tendency throughout most of history is relative stagnation. Development did occur, of course, but it occurred at irregular intervals, which did not lead to economic take-off. The reason for this relative stagnation is that social actors in pre-capitalist societies were not incentivized to systematically improve technology that economizes labor. Subsistence peasants were largely trying to stay alive, while lords were buying military equipment and luxury objects.

Then, at a relatively late point in history (the late 14th and early 15th centuries), capitalism emerged as an unintended consequence of human action. Capitalism is inherently linked to economic dynamism because it pressures social actors to constantly improve productive forces or risk being forced out of the market. Due to this economic productivity, capitalism holds a structural military advantage against non-capitalist societies, which is the main reason why it prevailed and spread around the world. While the initial emergence of capitalism was contingent, its later spread can be explained by structural factors.

34 This account has been the subject of substantial controversy. For a contemporary defense of the Brenner Thesis, see: Brenner, "Property and Progress"; Dimmock, Spencer. *The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*, 33–40; Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*.

These conclusions are important for the purposes of this article because they represent a discontinuous interpretation of human history, and thus go against a view that would support long-term trends of progress. Two dimensions should be mentioned here. First, the Political Marxist account is discontinuous in the sense that it does not suppose an inherent tendency toward the development of the forces of production throughout history. The sustained advance of technology is explained by a distinctly modern phenomenon, that is, by capitalism in the sense of social property relations. Second, it is discontinuous in the sense that it does not project modern economic motivations to premodern social actors. Capitalist markets are not simply an expression of the inherent need of humans to truck, barter, and exchange, to use Adam Smith's famous phrase. Rather, social actors in capitalism act the way that they do because of the historically specific set of institutions they find themselves in. The presented approach, therefore, historicizes capitalism in a sense in which other interpretations do not.

CAPITALISM OR INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS?

So far, this article has examined questions about progress by focusing on the conceptualization of long-term historical developments. This historical perspective is important because it shapes how modern institutions are understood.

How modern societies are framed will be illustrated by considering one final paradigm of social science, "New Institutional Economics." This approach originates in a strand of economic theory that highlights the role of institutional structures in shaping economic outcomes (as opposed to explanations that emphasize environmental, cultural, or demographic factors). One simple way to think about institutions is that they are the "rules of the game," the frameworks that determine the incentives of social action.[35] This tradition gained renewed prominence in the early 21st century. Its leading figures, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson,

35 Koyama, Mark, and Jared Rubin. *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022, 37–65.

were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2024.[36] Considering this perspective can therefore be understood as a way to address the findings of mainstream economic thought.

The most influential work in this paradigm is Acemoglu and Robinson's 2012 book *Why Nations Fail*.[37] Their central argument is that economic stagnation and economic development can be explained by distinguishing between "extractive" and "inclusive" institutions. I will, again, briefly outline these two concepts for the purposes of comparison.

Extractive institutions are systems in which political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, which enables them to extract resources from the rest of society. Such institutions encompass a wide range of historical social formations, such as slaveholding societies, feudal societies, and colonial regimes. While they differ in many respects, all these types of societies involve a dominant group extracting surplus from a subordinate group, whether through slavery, serfdom, or coercive labor systems such as encomiendas. To put it more broadly, extractive institutions restrict political and economic participation, limit property rights, and often rely on coercion or monopolies. These institutions hinder economic development, because they reduce incentives for investment and innovation, concentrate opportunities in the hands of the elites, and suppress the process of creative destruction that is necessary for sustained growth.[38]

Inclusive institutions, by contrast, represent a more recent historical development. These are pluralistic institutional structures in which most members of society can participate (hence the term "inclusive"). More concretely, inclusive institutions refer to competitive and open markets, secure property rights, democratic political systems, and broadly accessi-

36 Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. "The Prize in Economic Sciences 2024 – Press Release." 14 October 2024. Available at: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2024/press-release/ (access: September 2025).

37 Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. London: Profile Books, 2012.

38 *Ibid.*, 73–87.

ble healthcare and education systems. Simply put, they are the institutional forms that we typically associate with modernity. Inclusive institutions foster economic development because they draw on a broad pool of talent, encourage experimentation, and allow creative destruction to unfold. By creating incentives for a wide range of individuals to work, invest, and innovate, they generate sustained economic growth.[39]

It should be clear that the Political Marxist approach and the New Institutional Economics framework share a lot of similarities that warrant consideration (even if they are somewhat ideologically inconvenient for both paradigms). Most obviously, the Marxist distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist societies resembles the Institutionalist distinction between extractive and inclusive institutions. To look at it from a general perspective: both paradigms emphasize that institutional structures shape incentives, which in turn shape economic outcomes; both view premodern societies as inherently stagnant and attempt to explain the historical uniqueness of modern institutions; both understand the economic and political spheres as inherently interconnected; and both make similar empirical claims. It should not be surprising, then, that Acemoglu and Robinson attribute part of their account of England's transition from extractive to inclusive institutions to Brenner's work: "[Brenner's] *analysis of how the initial distribution of political power affected the consequences of the plague has greatly influenced our thinking*."[40]

Despite these parallels, the two paradigms differ significantly in their basic understanding of modern institutions. The main point to emphasize concerns how the continuity and discontinuity between premodern and modern societies are understood.

In the previous subsection, I discussed all the ways in which the Political Marxist approach emphasizes that capitalism marks a sharp break from earlier social formations. At the same time, however, this paradigm also

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 469.

stresses a very basic continuity: the persistence of the class structure. Pre-capitalist and capitalist societies differ in many respects, but both are understood as societies in which a dominant group, whether lords or capitalists, extracts surplus from a subordinate group, whether peasants or workers. The transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies represents a structural reconfiguration – the redistribution of property – rather than a linear progression. The most obvious expression of this point is in the emphasis on the dispossession of the lower class of society by which subsistence peasants become capitalist workers. To put it in simple terms, the transition to capitalism can be better described as a "give-and-take" rather than an "upgrade."

New Institutional Economics, by contrast, minimizes the downsides of modernity. That is not to say that Acemoglu and Robinson deny the existence of unequal power relations within inclusive institutions, which they often acknowledge.[41] However, these inequalities are not viewed as fundamental features of capitalism in the same way that they are in the Marxist approach. The opposition between extractive and inclusive institutions makes this perfectly clear: the concept of "extraction" itself is reserved to denote the specificity of premodern institutions. The continuity of the class structure of societies, which entails the dispossession of the lower class in the process of transition, is de-emphasized. In other words, the framing of extractive and inclusive institutions does suggest an "upgrade." New Institutional Economics, therefore, views premodern and modern institutions as essentially the opposite of each other, while Political Marxism, despite all elements of discontinuity, emphasizes the fundamental continuity of class relations.

The implications of the differences between the two frameworks can be elucidated by considering how a Marxist perspective might apply the notion of "inclusion" to capitalism. This consideration can be applied to both the economic and political spheres.

41 Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019.

Starting with the economic sphere, the Marxist perspective does suggest that capitalist markets are more inclusive than pre-capitalist ones in certain respects. Pre-capitalist markets fundamentally relied on political privileges that limit access to the market. Medieval guilds did, for instance, impose formal restrictions on the market sphere. At the same time, however, a capitalist market is also understood as exclusive in ways that pre-capitalist societies are not. The most important point to emphasize in this context is that workers in capitalism lack control over decisions concerning how production is organized, what is produced, and whether production continues at all. Economic decision-making is highly concentrated in the hands of the capitalist class. This is precisely why socialism is often described as "the democratization of the economic sphere." Another way to make this point is by emphasizing that Marxists primarily view capitalist markets in terms of dependence, whereas New Institutional Economists view them primarily as opportunities (as implied in the term "inclusive"). Simply put, Marxists emphasize that workers in capitalism do not have the power to effectuate changes in the workplace, to which they are forced to go because they do not have the ability to sustain themselves outside of having a job. In all these aspects, then, the economic sphere in capitalism is more accurately described as "non-inclusive." All these considerations flow from the unequal distribution of property in capitalist societies.[42]

A similar contrast can be seen in the political sphere. There is, again, a sense in which capitalism can be described as politically inclusive from a Marxist perspective. A democratic political system clearly represents a basic tenet of advanced capitalist societies (which is enabled by the fact that surplus extraction occurs in the private sphere).[43] However, this does not imply a pluralist interpretation of the capitalist state, as the New Institutionalist framing suggests. The Marxist point in this context is that the capitalist class holds a structural advantage in influencing the state. This advantage arises not only from the class's superior material resources, but

42 Chibber, *Confronting Capitalism*, 5–50; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 99–129.

43 For a comprehensive discussion about the relation between capitalism and democracy, see: Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. London and New York: Verso, 2016.

also from the state's structural dependence on capital. Since investment decisions rest with capitalists, and since the state's fiscal capacity depends on taxing the economy, governments have strong incentives to uphold conditions favorable to capital accumulation. If investment declines, the resulting economic downturns can undermine political stability and the position of governing parties. This is why the reforms that are pursued by the capitalist states are, in general, skewed toward the interests of capital. To put it in simple terms, business leaders have much more influence over political outcomes than ordinary workers because of the basic structure of capitalist societies. In this sense, the political sphere in capitalism can again be described as "non-inclusive." These conclusions are based on the unequal distribution of property in capitalism.[44]

Political Marxism and New Institutional Economics thus share several assumptions, but their basic frameworks imply different conceptualizations of modernity. The Institutionalist approach views modern institutions as fundamentally pluralistic and inclusive. The Marxist perspective, on the other hand, inherently implies that modern institutions represent a combination of inclusive and exclusive dimensions. This difference arises from whether the transition from premodern to modern societies is viewed as a linear progression or as a structural reconfiguration.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING PROGRESS

The discussions of Marx's theory of history, Darwinian evolution, Analytical Marxism, Political Marxism, and New Institutional Economics all carry certain implications for how we should understand the concept of progress. Although they have been alluded to throughout this article, I will conclude by considering these implications in a comprehensive manner.

Before proceeding, an epistemological comment is in order. The following discussion involves certain normative judgments, which is unusual

44 For characterizations of the capitalist state, see: Chibber, *Confronting Capitalism*, 51–93; Heinrich, *An Introduction*, 199–213; Rutar, Tibor. *Sodobni zagovor historičnega materializma: sociologija, filozofija, zgodovina*. Ljubljana: Sophia, 2016, 183–194.

for an academic argument. I contend that this is justified for two reasons. First, the considerations about progress are grounded in the differences examined throughout the article. In this sense, they represent an extension of the contrasts between social-scientific paradigms, which are themselves not entirely neutral. Second, the concept of progress is intrinsically political in a way that most analytical categories are not. Any discussion that addresses this concept directly therefore necessarily carries normative weight.

The distinction between evolution and teleology, as outlined through the relevance of Darwinian theory for Analytical Marxism, serves primarily to underline the point that an account positing long-term developmental tendencies is not necessarily teleological. The charge of teleology is too often invoked whenever the term "progress" is used, even though most contemporary social scientific theories are not teleological in structure. To focus on a particular case: the global expansion of capitalism over the past few centuries can be explained by structural mechanisms, and there is no reason to assume these mechanisms will cease to operate in the near future. This view does not presuppose that history is oriented toward a predetermined end, but rests on empirically grounded and theoretically justified claims about historical dynamics.

The discontinuous interpretation of history, as outlined through Political Marxism's criticism of both Analytical Marxism and the commercial model of capitalism, has several implications for understanding progress. First, it challenges the idea that modernity constitutes the culmination of long-term historical developments, which is how progress has traditionally been conceptualized. This interpretation is commonly associated with narratives of Western or European exceptionalism, and has often informed right-leaning accounts of history. According to this view, the West had already developed a more rational worldview and comparatively advanced institutions and technologies in antiquity, providing foundations that were built upon in later centuries. Setbacks occurred, of course, but they were merely inter-

ruptions within an overarching trajectory. In other words, the conditions for the later triumph of the West were already present millennia earlier.[45]

A discontinuous understanding of historical development is fundamentally inconsistent with classical claims of Western exceptionalism. According to the interpretations discussed above, modern institutions constitute a break from premodern ones rather than their final stage of development. Premodern institutions were primarily defined by their stability and stagnation: there was no transhistorical tendency toward the development of productive forces, and pre-capitalist markets did not inherently generate significant increases in productivity. This is why such institutions persisted for millennia with very limited economic growth. Modern institutions only became possible when pre-capitalist structures – most notably the system of political privileges – were dismantled. Accordingly, the view that Europe was marked by proto-modern developmental tendencies for millennia represents a misleading interpretation of history.

A further implication of emphasizing historical discontinuity is the denaturalization of certain aspects of social life, particularly the character of capitalist markets. This point can be made by considering the opposite perspective: if one emphasizes continuity between premodern and modern markets, one can argue that the contemporary world reflects an enduring feature of human nature. The notion that capitalist markets are a mere extension of the entire human past makes it plausible to claim that capitalism is simply the outgrowth of the natural propensity of humans to exchange goods. This view implies that capitalism represents the logical outcome of history.

On the other hand, if capitalism is understood as a radical break with earlier social structures, then it is very hard to argue that it represents an inherent part of human nature. This is why a precise conceptualization of

45 For examples of such accounts, see: Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*; Shapiro, Ben. *The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great.* New York: Broadside Books, 2019; Stark, Rodney. *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity.* Wilmington: ISI Books, 2014.

the rise and spread of capitalism is important. As argued above, the Political Marxist account sees capitalism's emergence as a contingent process and its global diffusion as largely driven by military conflict. The centrality of military struggle in particular undermines any claim of a natural or inherent spread of the market. Simply put, capitalism represents a fundamental departure from most of human history, not a universal human condition.

These considerations also lead to the following basic, but important conclusion: if the current social context is not inherently natural, then it can be transformed. To historicize capitalism is therefore to open the space for thinking about alternatives.

A discontinuous view of history thus challenges narratives of long-term Western superiority and suggests that present social conditions can be transcended. However, this perspective does not itself offer a normative judgment of different social forms. That is to say, identifying the differences between premodern and modern institutions tells us little about their respective consequences for human well-being. Once we set aside teleological accounts, long-term historical trajectories, and restrictive conceptions about what is natural, we are left with a simpler question: How do the outcomes of pre-capitalist and capitalist institutions compare?

This question lies at the core of contemporary understandings of progress. The central component of this notion is that modern societies have generated widespread prosperity, leading to a historically unprecedented reduction in poverty. While modernity has introduced many new problems, these do not outweigh the significance of rising living standards.

As already suggested, historical materialism is inherently critical of capitalism. But the character of this criticism has to be considered carefully. In my view, the claim made by some authors that capitalism's role in reducing poverty should be denied or minimized is ill-advised, as it conflicts with the

broad consensus in economic history and the social sciences.[46] Apart from the fact that normative arguments have to be supported by empirical evidence, claims that disregard widely recognized findings are unlikely to be persuasive. Furthermore, downplaying the association of capitalism and modern prosperity goes against what historical materialism *itself predicts*. As discussed above, capitalist societies are exceptionally productive because they pressure actors to continuously develop the forces of production, which represents the *sine qua non* of rising living standards. And over the long term, this rise has, in fact, occurred.

Criticisms of capitalism, therefore, should not rest on minimizing the benefits of economic growth. However, this does not imply that capitalism should be equated with progress in a straightforward manner. Objections to capitalism stem from understanding the internal problems of the system through both a historical perspective and an imagination of future possibilities.

The significance of the historical perspective for understanding modern institutions is what the comparison between Political Marxism and New Institutional Economics sought to demonstrate. The main point of this comparison was to show that the Marxist understanding of the transition to modern institutions as a redistribution of property is why it is best positioned to grasp both the positive and negative dimensions of modernity at the same time. Historical materialism suggests that the transition to capitalism enabled sustained economic growth, a reduction of poverty, and a democratization of the political sphere – but also produced widespread market dependence, a loss of democratic control in the economic sphere,

46 For a perspective that questions the connection between capitalism and poverty reduction, see: Sullivan, Dylan, and Jason Hickel. "Capitalism and Extreme Poverty: A Global Analysis of Real Wages, Human Height, and Mortality since the Long 16th Century." *World Development*, 161 (2023), 1–18. For a criticism of this view, see: Rutar, Tibor. "Re-Examining Extreme Poverty Before and After the Transition to Capitalism, 1300s–1900s: The Issue of Definition, Periodization, Measurement, and Causal Responsibility." *International Review of Sociology*, 34/2 (2024), 300–334. For general overviews of the main findings of economic history, see: Allen, Robert C. *Global Economic History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Koyama and Rubin, *How the World Became Rich*; Rutar, *Capitalism for Realists*.

and a political system heavily shaped by the interests of capital. These outcomes follow from the fact that capitalism rests on a structural inequality in the distribution of property, which represents a central continuity with previous class societies. In other words, by conceptualizing the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies as a structural reconfiguration rather than a linear development, historical materialism is uniquely positioned to capture the ambivalence of progress.

To put the main conclusion another way: the key for a historical materialist understanding of modernity is to see clearly in which dimensions capitalism represents a discontinuity with previous historical eras, which most importantly has to do with the unprecedented character of widespread market dependence, as well as in which dimensions it represents a continuity with those eras, which primarily has to do with the persistence of class structures.

The centrality of class relations underscores several of the standard arguments against progress. These arguments include the notion that the capitalist production process is marked by domination and exploitation, which can only be contested collectively; that broad-based prosperity has historically been achieved through struggles from below rather than the benevolence of capitalists; that capitalist incentives undermine a rational and timely response to contemporary crises, which can again only be countered by collective action; and so on. Political implications of this kind follow from a framework that emphasizes the continuity of the class structure of societies.[47]

The final point to be raised concerns a dimension of progress that has not yet been discussed, namely the relation between present conditions and what is possible. One way to think about politics is to consider the gap between the current reality and viable alternatives. That is to say, if the current conditions are interpreted as objectionable but the possibility of improvement is limited, then political possibilities are likewise constrained.

47 I outlined the arguments that are typically made against progress in the editorial introduction to this issue.

The fact that there is little to be done means that it is hard to normatively condemn social actors in such situations. If, on the other hand, political possibilities for improvement are significant, that implies significant normative responsibility. The normative assessment of a system, therefore, depends not only on comparisons with the past, but also on judgments about what could exist instead.

This perspective has clear implications in the context of comparing premodern and modern institutions. It is undeniable that premodern social actors possessed relatively limited technological, organizational, and infrastructural capacities, which means that the possibilities of improvements were constrained. Feudal lords did not have the ability to make life substantially better for the majority of the population even if they had wanted to do so. Modern capitalist societies, by contrast, possess significantly greater capacities than any other society in history, but fail to fully realize them. In other words, contemporary societies hold ample potential for improvement, which has important normative implications. To put this point on a more general level: the fact that capitalism has produced the greatest advances in human history means that the gap between the society we have and the society we could have is larger than ever before. It follows that capitalism is – in this specific sense – the most objectionable social system in human history. A critical view of this system is therefore warranted.

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava pojem napredka skozi razpravo o različnih naravoslovnih in družboslovnih paradigmah. Raznovrstni pogledi na dolgotrajne družbene spremembe in modernost, ki jih ponujajo posamezni pristopi, razjasnijo pojem napredka z več vidikov.

Izhodišče članka je Marxovo pojmovanje historičnega materializma. Ta teorija je pomembna za razumevanje napredka, ker ne predstavlja zgolj obravnave posameznih družbenih formacij, temveč nudi tudi razlago, kako se družbe spreminjajo skozi čas. Prav zaradi tega se historičnemu materializmu pogosto očita teleološkost oziroma iskanje cilja zgodovinskega razvoja. Za obravnavo tega očitka je smiselna primerjava z Darwinovo teorijo evolucije, katere pomen je Marx prepoznal že v 19. stoletju. Evolucijska teorija pokaže, da je mogoče smer razvoja razumeti na znanstveno utemeljen način brez teleologije.

Tako razmišljanje v naravoslovju je najtesneje povezano z družboslovno paradigmo »analitičnega marksizma«, ki je skušala klasični historični materializem podpreti z znanstvenimi argumenti. Razprava, ki je sledila, je sicer uspela ubraniti in nadgraditi nekatere teze marksistične teorije zgodovine, vendar jih je ohranila v zelo spremenjeni in okrnjeni obliki. Razvojni vzorci obdobja, v katerem obstaja kapitalizem, so bistveno drugačni od razvojnih vzorcev prejšnjih zgodovinskih obdobij.

Paradigma »političnega marksizma« ponuja razumevanje kapitalizma, ki omogoči drugačen pogled na zgodovinski razvoj. Na osnovi kritike pristopov, ki prehitro enačijo kapitalizem z razširjeno tržno menjavo, politični marksizem zagovarja definicijo kapitalizma kot specifično obliko lastninskih odnosov. Ta perspektiva omogoča jasnejše razumevanje, v katerih pogledih lahko moderne institucije razumemo kot kontinuiteto in v katerih kot diskontinuiteto s predmodernimi oblikami družbenih odnosov.

Zadnja paradigma, ki jo članek obravnava, je »nova institucionalna ekonomija«. Ta pristop sodobno gospodarsko rast razlaga na podlagi razlike

med »ekstraktivnimi« in »inkluzivnimi« političnimi in ekonomskimi institucijami. Kljub pomembnim podobnostim s političnim marksizmom primerjava med tema pristopoma pokaže temeljno razliko v razumevanju modernosti. Ta razlika izhaja iz vprašanja, ali je prehod iz predmodernih v moderne institucije mogoče razumeti kot prestrukturiranje družbenih odnosov ali pa kot linearen proces.

Vse obravnavane značilnosti tvorijo podlago za razpravo o pojmu napredka v zaključku članka. Osrednja teza je, da je sodobni historični materializem tista paradigma, ki najbolje zajame ambivalentnost modernosti in napredka.

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Ceremonies of Civilization: A Study on the Aesthetics of Progress in the Age of Comparisons

Ceremoniali civilizacije: raziskava o estetiki napredka v dobi primerjav

Augusto Petter

ABSTRACT

This article shows how post-Enlightenment philosophies of history were aesthetically embodied in certain events, institutions, and individuals that disseminated the linear and imperialist temporality of progress. As a case study, the article examines the 1876–1877 journey abroad of Dom Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, in the context of civilizational comparisons. The emperor's practice of visiting institutions that materialized and displayed progress (museums, universities, factories, etc.) attracted the attention of the international press, which contributed to the fashioning and dissemination of that image. Moreover, his personal aversion to pompous ceremonies led to the adoption of novel political rituals that took place within progressive institutions and events, such as the International Exhibition in Philadelphia and the Caxton Celebration in London. Fashioned as "ceremonies of civilization," these events – like the progressive emperor of a country socially and economically based on slave labor – reveal temporal ambivalences in the "age of comparisons."

Keywords

history of monarchies, progress, civilization, political aesthetics

IZVLEČEK

Članek preučuje, kako so se postrazsvetljenske filozofije zgodovine utelešale v določenih politično-estetskih dogodkih, institucijah in osebah, ki so širili linearno in imperialistično časovnost napredka. Kot študijo primera je predstavljeno potovanje brazilskega cesarja Dom Pedra II. v letih 1876–1877 v kontekstu primerjave civilizacij. Cesarjeva praksa obiskovanja institucij, ki so materializirale in prikazovale napredek (muzeji, univerze, tovarne itd.), je pritegnila pozornost mednarodnega tiska, ki je prispeval k oblikovanju in širjenju te podobe. Poleg tega je cesarjevo osebno zavračanje pompoznih ceremonij prispevalo k uvedbi novih političnih ritualov, ki so potekali v okviru naprednih institucij in dogodkov, kot sta Mednarodna razstava v Philadelphii ter Caxtonova proslava v Londonu. V skladu s podobo naprednega vladarja države, katere družbeni in gospodarski temelj je bilo suženjsko delo, te dogodke lahko razumemo kot »ceremoniale civilizacije«, ki razkrivajo časovne ambivalentnosti v »dobi primerjav«.

Ključne besede

zgodovina monarhij, napredek, civilizacija, politična estetika

INTRODUCTION

Our contemporary understanding of historical time and the political cosmologies emerging from it was, wrote Reinhart Koselleck, shaped by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, forming "*the foundation for history in general as well as for progress*."[1] The concept of progress, like that of history, refers to the same existential mechanism: the disjunction between future expectations and past experiences. These are integral to the philosophies of history that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries, frameworks in which historical time was, in Koselleck's words, "*subject to constant renewal*."[2]

Koselleck characterized progress as a distinctly modern concept of movement, inherently tied to acceleration. Simultaneously, historical experience – conceived as a collective singular – enabled the world to be structured by hierarchies of civilizational maturity. This hierarchy was based on prevailing political constitutions and levels of scientific, technical, and economic development, all of which were cast as globally universal benchmarks.[3]

Within this framework of universal history, the world was set into a picture of itself. It was envisioned as a unified narrative in which nation-states, empires, science, technology, and capital converged toward a singular trajectory of progress. This trajectory ultimately pointed toward one (or a few) dominant ideals of progress, most notably industrialized and nationalized Western civilization. Under these conditions, peripheral nations, deemed lagging in the universal march toward civilization, were compelled to accelerate their development processes to gain recognition within the global community of nations.

1 Koselleck, Reinhart. *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 269.

2 *Ibid.*, 196.

3 *Ibid.*, 236–248.

In this article, I will demonstrate how the experience of 19th-century peripheral monarch Dom Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil (1825–1891), aesthetically represented the process of "enframing" (*Gestell*) of the 19th-century world picture (*das Weltbild*), with its magnetic center being the idea of progress.[4] The scenarios in which Dom Pedro participated – the International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine in Philadelphia, the Caxton Celebration in London (commemorating the 400th anniversary of the first printed book in England), the opening of the Bayreuth Festival in Bavaria, and the Third International Congress of Orientalists in Saint Petersburg – were material expressions of the world-picture described above.[5] This case offers a new perspective on the aesthetic entanglement of science, technology, and politics under the broader conceptual framework of progress. Through this view, we can identify philosophies of history that are aesthetically embodied in specific events, institutions, and individuals, contributing to a linear, empty, and imperialist temporality at the heart of so-called modernity.

To this end, the article will first contextualize the emergence of these historical philosophies. It will proceed by introducing the case study of Dom Pedro II of Brazil in order to explore how monarchy was positioned within the broader march of progress and how this reveals what I term the "aesthetics of progress." Finally, it will examine the "ceremonies of civilization," public spectacles that visually and ritually enacted a new form of power aesthe-

4 Martin Heidegger, in *The Age of the World Picture* (1938), describes modern history as the epoch in which the world is, in a fundamental sense, taken over as a "picture" – meaning that the world's representation comes to stand with greater authority than the world itself. The world seen as an object was enframed in such a way that it starts to reveal itself to us only through representation. Heidegger, Martin. "The Age of the World Picture." In: *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 115–154. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. Tymothy Mitchell expands this idea to study the 19th-century colonial context and poses the subject that stands before the picture of the world as an imperial one. Mitchell posits that the modern citizen becomes an observer and the world – mainly the colonized one – becomes its object of knowledge. This subject/object relationship that composes the picture of the world is shamelessly disclosed in events such as World Exhibitions, Orientalist Congresses, etc. Therefore, it is a useful category to understand Dom Pedro's part of the structures of power in the globe that were aesthetically reproduced as an image of the world. Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

5 For a general discussion of Dom Pedro's travels, see: Petter, Augusto. "The Imperial Meteor: Time and Velocity in Pedro II's Journey of 1876–7." *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 130 (2024), 55–73.

tics, a form that promoted the abandonment of royal pomp to the advantage of "republican" fashion. My case study, I conclude, demonstrates how such ceremonies materialized the notion of absolute progress, and may have served as tools for certain monarchs – and perhaps rulers in general – to join the nation-centered civilized world. Those ceremonies, together with Dom Pedro's appearance, will appear simultaneously, disrupting the idea of what a king should look like. It also represents the status quo of a century increasingly turning itself toward change and movement. The development of both the ceremonies and costumes will rely on using the concept of "aesthetics." Therefore, my examples will emphasize the sensory and material elements – sound, sight, movement, dress, and technological display – through which progress was experienced and legitimized in the second half of the 19th century.[6]

THE AGE OF COMPARISONS

> Such an age gets its meaning because in it the various world views, customs, and cultures are compared and experienced next to one another, which was not possible earlier, when there was always a localized rule for each culture, just as all artistic styles were bound to place and time. Now, man's increased aesthetic feeling will decide definitively from among the many forms which offer themselves for comparison. [...] This is the age of comparisons! That is its pride, but also by rights its sorrow. Let us not be afraid of this sorrow! Instead, we will conceive the task that this age sets us to be as great as possible.[7]
>
> (Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, *All Too Human*, 1878).

6 The idea of an aesthetics of progress resonates with the studies on the relationship between aesthetics and sovereignty collected in: Ben-Dor Benite, Zvi, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr, eds. *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

7 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Section 1, "Of First and Last Things," Aphorism 23.

Johann Gottfried Herder, while often positioned as a critic of the Enlightenment's universalist assumptions, was still in line with the period's progressive philosophy of history while reimagining historical development through the organic unfolding of national cultures. His emphasis on *Volksgeist*, or the singular spirit of each people, shifted attention from abstract reason to historically and culturally embedded communities. This idea offered plurality and exceptionality, while still remaining a teleological model of historical development. Herder's studies of nations' kernels laid the groundwork for global comparative structures in which the history of each people could be understood as a stage in a broader civilizational arc. "*Each nationality*," he wrote, "*has its center of happiness within itself, as every sphere has its center of gravity*."[8] In this view, history is not simply composed of a singular Enlightenment march, but instead a landscape of diverse nations advancing at different rhythms, all contributing to the full realization of humanity. Yet Herder's relativism remained tethered to the Enlightenment ideal of improvement: each nation, in cultivating its own genius, moved toward fuller expression and mutual recognition within an interconnected world. Herder stated that all the questions concerning the progress of our species are answerable with a single word: humanity (*Menschheit*).[9] Thus, his work both complicated and reinforced the progressive temporality of Enlightenment historicism, replacing abstract universality with a comparative historicism of national becoming.

It was under these conditions that the dialectical movement between Enlightenment and Romanticism in the second half of the 19th century culminated in what Friedrich Nietzsche referred to as "the age of comparisons." The decades that separate Nietzsche and Herder's reflections witnessed the outcomes of the First Industrial Revolution, and the start of the second. The world was significantly more interconnected than at the beginning of the century, and national revolts and revolutions came to fruition all over the globe. Europe started to fill in the blanks on the map that

8 Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024, 437.

9 Koselleck, Reinhart. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Trans. Todd Samuel Presner. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 170–207.

Conrad's Charles Marlow had dreamed of exploring as a child, and that, as an adult, he was sent to colonize.[10] The world had been touched by the pantheon of progress – as selected by Koselleck – Turgot, Condorcet, Iselin, Wieland, and Kant, and in the 19th century, Engels, Haeckel, von Hartmann, and, of course, Hegel.[11]

This development happened not only in the world of ideas, as progress was also seen materially. "*One need only bring to mind the change from the stagecoach to the railway and from the automobile to the jet airplane: through acceleration, the spatial pregivens in nature have been completely reconfigured anew within the span of one and a half centuries.*"[12] The age of comparisons was seasoned by the Kantian idea of infinite progress. The present witnessed changes whose accelerating speed distanced our expectations of the future from us. When referring to the concept, rather than to the idea of progress, Koselleck talks about the understanding of a universalizing movement.[13] A movement towards converging progress into a collective singular. Before, one could simply speak of progress in technology, progress in morals, progress in this or that. Now progress, like history, became an entity in itself; it had its own reason, and its own endings. This is what Tyson Retz described as "Absolute Progress."[14]

The concept of universal history enabled Europeans to travel the world perceiving other societies as existing at earlier stages of their own historical development. This concept was one of the foundational grounds of the 19th century's evolutionist perspectives, which justified imperialism, colonization, and subjugation of others considered inferior to bring progress to the "non-civilized" world. On the other hand, Retz speaks of relative progress, which can be presented as the problem of the measurability of progress. In

10 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. Ed. Owen Knowles. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 108–109.

11 Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 227.

12 *Ibid.*, 220.

13 *Ibid.*, 5.

14 Retz, Tyson. *Progress and the Scale of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

the Darwinian world of conflict and competition, the weighing scale tilted toward progress for some meant decline for others.

To illustrate how these ideas were enacted in practice, it is worth turning to a historical event that embodied this worldview: the Brussels Geographical Conference of 1876, a ceremony of progress that reflected the imperial ambitions of the Belgian monarchy.[15] The nations invited and present were those who explored the African continent with imperial intentions: Italy, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, France, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Belgium (the host). The King of Belgium was the President of the Conference, which was composed mainly of specialists in geography and wealthy capitalists. Under the royal leadership of Leopold II, the event was transformed, by his opening speech, into a ceremony of progress. The location was not a university, but his own palace. The justification for having Belgium as the host country, said the king, was its position as a "*central and neutral state*."[16] Therefore, for the king, the conference would have as its primary goal "[t]*o open up to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness in which entire populations are enveloped*." It was "*a crusade worthy of this age of progress*."[17] Such events would lead to repercussions that later influenced the Congress of Berlin and the Scramble for Africa. The absent states and other entities and subjects – including the Emperor of Brazil – would receive the congress's annals only later on.

Comparisons on a global scale finally became possible. And more than that, they became a constitutive part of the enframing of the world-as--picture. Stories in their individual format were shown simultaneously in one history, and the experience of national histories appeared as part of a world or universal history. The consolidation of a universal history as a global framework of comparisons offered new coordinates for thinking about national trajectories. For Brazil, a peripheral country aspiring to enter the

15 For a general account of this event, see: Banning, Émile. *Africa and the Brussels Geographical Conference*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1877.

16 *Ibid.*, 153.

17 *Ibid.*, 152.

hall of civilized nations, this meant positioning its history within debates about progress and civilization that circulated among nation builders and intellectuals all over the globe. These debates had Western Europe and the US as the leading locations of the world's progression.

The influence of this broader historical and intellectual context on Dom Pedro's worldview is evident in his correspondence with other members of the political and scholarly elite. Of particular relevance here is the cultivation of a friendship between the monarch and Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the French minister in Brazil from 1869 to 1870. Gobineau's writings on race and civilization made him a representative commentator on the notions of progress and decline that haunted the ultra-reactionary political perspectives of the century's eve and beyond. The Emperor Dom Pedro II and his friend the Count of Gobineau, now also his travel companion, were masters in making comparisons. When not travelling together, they still corresponded on matters like "*the moral progress of each nation*," "*progress in sciences*," and, from Gobineau's side, specifically "*the spiritual decay of the current world we live in*," in comparison with his beloved Early Middle Ages.[18] For Gobineau, civilization means a "*state of relative stability, where the mass of men try to satisfy their wants by peaceful means, and are refined in their conduct and intelligence,*" which is strictly conditioned by race.[19] Human instincts and the striving for life with intelligence and creativity are thus the source of mental improvement and material progress.

Gobineau's example is crucial not only because he is Dom Pedro's contemporary, friend, and travel companion, but also because his perspective on progress as decadence shows that it still does not escape from the modern temporal conception of time and history: the collective singular to which all humanity belongs.

> The idea of an infinite progress is very seductive to many modern philosophers, and they support it by declaring that our civilization has many merits and

18 Gobineau, Joseph Arthur de. "Letter to Dom Pedro II." 8 February 1882. In: Wilhelm Rauers, *Dom Pedro II e o conde de Gobineau*, 613. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1938.

19 *Ibid.*

> advantages which our differently trained ancestors did not possess. [...] We are told that our scientific opinions are truer than they were; that our manners are, as a rule, kindly, and our morals better than those of the Greeks and Romans. Especially with regard to political liberty, they say, have we ideas and feelings, beliefs and tolerances, that prove our superiority. [...] A little more serious consideration of history will show what truth there is in these high claims.[20]

Disagreeing on several topics with Gobineau, Dom Pedro was more optimistic about progress. During a journey through Egypt in 1871 – engaged in personal studies on the progress of the world – the emperor reflected on the modern state of the country while contemplating the legacy of Ancient Egypt. For him, "*Egypt crawls along the civilizational road.*"[21] However, he also remarks that there were suitable locations for spectacles of progress: theatres and the French opera. "*The civilized could find much fun in there.*"[22]

Such forms of progress are only conceivable if all social and cultural elements are understood to be contemporaneous, i.e., belonging to the same calendar, to the same time. They depend on a narrative expressing a temporality that runs irreversibly like an arrow from the past to the future.[23] Both Gobineau and Pedro II of Brazil belong to this context.

DOM PEDRO'S JOURNEY OF 1876–1877 AND THE AESTHETICS OF PROGRESS

Dom Pedro II, Brazil's second and last emperor, had travelled several times within his empire before journeying abroad in the 1870s. In the first decades of his reign, he journeyed from the southern to northern provinces.

20 De Gobineau, Arthur. *The Inequality of Human Races.* London: William Heinemann, 1915, 155.

21 Dom Pedro II. "Entry of 7 November 1871." In: *Diário do Imperador (1840–1891),* ed. Begonha Bediaga. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 1999.

22 Dom Pedro II. "Entry of 10 November 1871." In: *Diário do Imperador (1840–1891),* ed. Begonha Bediaga. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 1999.

23 Latour, Bruno. *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique.* Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

The monarch's being-everywhere was undoubtedly in service of the imperial political intention to maintain the newly formed Brazilian nation-state's symbolic unity. These trips also aimed to investigate the civilizational level of the empire's peripheries. When abroad, the countries he visited were treated as comparative case studies, and his presence acted as cultural diplomacy – projecting progress and civilization.[24]

In 1871, Dom Pedro visited key cities in Europe and North Africa. By 1876, having already built strong ties with European ruling houses and intellectual circles, he added the United States, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Scandinavia to his itinerary.[25] Well-known by the foreign press, newspapers closely tracked his new journey, especially in the US, where *The New York Herald* gave him notable attention. The American media portrayed Dom Pedro as both scholar and sovereign, "*a good chemist and a good engineer*," noting that he possessed Brazil's finest library and read in several languages, including English.[26] He toured incognito, not for pomp but to observe and study. These accounts forged a global image: a modern monarch disdaining ceremony, fluent in modern media, intellectually agile, and relentlessly mobile.

In Brazil, a parliamentary debate questioned the utility of the emperor's foreign tours. *O Mosquito* satirized public expectations: "*With his return, we all expected to see the inauguration of a new era.*"[27] Yet his travels failed to industrially or socially transform Brazil, which remained stagnant. In other words, despite the emperor's image as a liberal individual, his country remained a slaveholding society with its economy heavily dependent on slavery-based structures. There were, indeed, several small steps taken by the crown during the mid-18th century to reduce the presence of that shameful institution in the country, and the emperor himself did eventu-

24 Petter, "The Imperial Meteor," 55–73.

25 *Ibid.*, 56.

26 *The Daily Argus*, 19 April 1876.

27 *O Mosquito*, 25 March 1876.

ally publicly express abolitionist and other liberal ideals.[28] However, even the court city of Rio de Janeiro, in the 1870s, was still sustained by slave labor, including its commerce, transport system, and domestic domains. Dom Pedro's reformist deeds – or lack thereof – and his attitude of regularly compromising with the landowner elites obviously slowed rather than accelerated the process of abolition. The project of Brazilian civilization not only paradoxically included slavery, but was financed by it.[29] Thus, under those conditions, the gap between the emperor's ceremonial activities abroad and the social reality of the empire at home is evident.[30]

Besides being the citizen emperor, or the American emperor, Dom Pedro was recognized by the international press as someone "*familiar with several languages, he is especially fond of reading the English and American poets and essayists.*"[31] The same reports described him as "*rather actuated by a desire to observe and study our character and institutions as a people, than by the ambition to receive the homage and lionizing which are regarded as the due of royal guests.*"[32] Taking travel notes along the way, he would be able to assess each nation's progress. Such press reports assisted in forging and spreading the globally famed monarchic persona and his progressive characteristics: his aversion to ceremonies; interest in the international media; intellectual skills; mastery of time management; and ability to move fast from one place to another.

Dom Pedro was depicted as an intelligent observer, a king with the eyes of a scholar. He was a gentleman and a ruler who used every travel experience and every sight seen along the way to improve his character and intellect. The idea behind his travelling around the world was that this would grant him cultural and intellectual enrichment that he would later

28 Barman, Roderick J. *Citizen Emperor: Pedro II and the Making of Brazil, 1825–1891.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 391.

29 Chalhoub, Sidney. *Visões da Liberdade: Uma história das últimas décadas da escravidão na Corte.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990.

30 Schwarcz, Lilia Moritz. *As Barbas do Imperador: D. Pedro II, um monarca nos trópicos.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998, 493–494.

31 *The Daily Argus*, 19 April 1876.

32 *Ibid.*

apply to the *aperfeiçoamento* of his nation's institutions.[33] While abroad, promoting technological innovations, worshipping progress, he was a "knight of modernity" riding the swan of Baudelaire, transforming the unease in exile of the big-city wanderer into a heightened awareness of the world.[34] The *flâneur*, just like Dom Pedro, was a creature able to "*store time as a battery stores energy*."[35] To Dom Pedro, and to the *flâneur*, the metropolis (more specifically Paris and any other civilized city) is no longer his native place, but instead it "*represents for him a theatrical display, an arena*."[36]

Dom Pedro was the epitome of Baudelaire's passionate observer. As already noted, he was often described by reporters and travel companions as watching, inspecting, gazing, and analyzing everything at every stage of his itinerary. Thus, being anonymous and placing oneself inside of (as a citizen) and – at the same time – apart from (as a monarch) the world made him the ideal imperial observer, being both judging and scientific. Precisely due to these characteristics, this kind of observer was seen metaphorically by Baudelaire as a prince. Dom Pedro, then, had an advantage over the ordinary spectator: he was literally the king; and in the very etiquette of the monarchy, together with the laws and traditions regulating it, what mattered the most was the king's sight, what he actually saw. Like the *flâneur*, Dom Pedro engaged in an incognito performance in which he sought to feel himself "*everywhere at home; to view the world, to be at the*

33 The ideas of *aperfeiçoamento* ("perfectioning") and *melhoramento* ("betterment") are worth mentioning here, because they belong to the lexicon of progress in 19th-century Brazil. They imply the idea of the perfectibility of its institutions. Cribelli, Tereza. *Industrial Forests and Mechanical Marvels: Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 40–43.

34 Baudelaire's swan is taken as an allegory of exile. During the 19th century, it frequently appeared as a creature at home on the water, yet displaced by a changing, man-made urban environment. While in Paris, Dom Pedro seemed to wish to embody this French symbol of "modernity." However, he was less depicted as the Baudelairean man than as a monarch who had adopted Yankee ideas about productivity and work. See: Babuts, Nicolae. "Baudelaire in the Circle of Exiles: A Study of 'Le Cygne'." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 22/1 (1993), 123–138; Petter, "The Imperial Meteor," 55–73.

35 Benjamin, Walter. *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, 107.

36 *Ibid.*

heart of the world, and yet hidden from the world."[37] However, unlike the common *flâneur*, Dom Pedro seemed happily exiled, showed himself free from the burdens of his crown, and paradoxically, simultaneously embodied the urge and rush of progress to see everything as a learner, as well as the rising figure of the globetrotter as a tourist.[38] He did not carry the freedom of the *flâneur* as much as he carried the fashion of one.

Dom Pedro, for the Americans, with his seemingly liberal behavior, was pushing Brazil toward the civilized world, both in terms of social and material development. By embodying the fashion of a progressive ruler, the emperor acted or performed in specific places and events that represented the apogee of progress in universal history. He merged the *flâneur* with the image of the Yankee emperor, a true American gentleman, strolling incognito through the metropoles seeking art and culture, but also industrious and efficient.[39] Dom Pedro combined the republican *flâneur* with the

37 Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays.* Trans. Jonathan Mayne. London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1965, 12.

38 After his first visit to Europe in 1871–72, Dom Pedro expressed resentment for having to sit on the throne and being unable to deal with exercises of the spirit [*ocupações do espírito*]. His correspondence with Gobineau is quite revealing in this respect. While in Petropolis, he wrote: *"I work a lot now, but there is so much to read and to study that I have nothing left but just a little time for the occupations that you remind me about and that are so dear to us."* And regarding his lack of time for such pursuits, Dom Pedro complained that: *"I cannot afford it, I do not have but very little time for myself..."* [Trans. Augusto Petter.] See: Dom Pedro II. "D. Pedro II to Gobineau." 14 October 1873; "D. Pedro II to Gobineau."15 January 1874. In: George Raeders, *Dom Pedro II e o conde de Gobineau.* São Paulo: Ed. Nacional, 1938, 137–155.

39 Travelling incognito was not an invention of Dom Pedro. Other monarchs and celebrities in modern history did follow the same practice, which paradoxically often attracted the attention of the press. The most telling of these is the case of Tsar Piotr I of Russia, who travelled in western Europe as a seaman to learn from lived experience and later applied what he had learned at home. In the summer of 1876, while in the Russian Empire, the incognito nature of Dom Pedro's travels was widely noted by Russians newspapers, and spawned comparisons between the travel styles of the monarchs. On the phenomenon of travelling incognito, see: Barth, Volker. *Inkognito: Geschichte eines Zeremoniells.* Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013.

disciplined, reformist monarch. His aesthetic turn thus echoes Max Weber's idea of a bourgeois ethos replacing aristocratic pomp in modern history.[40]

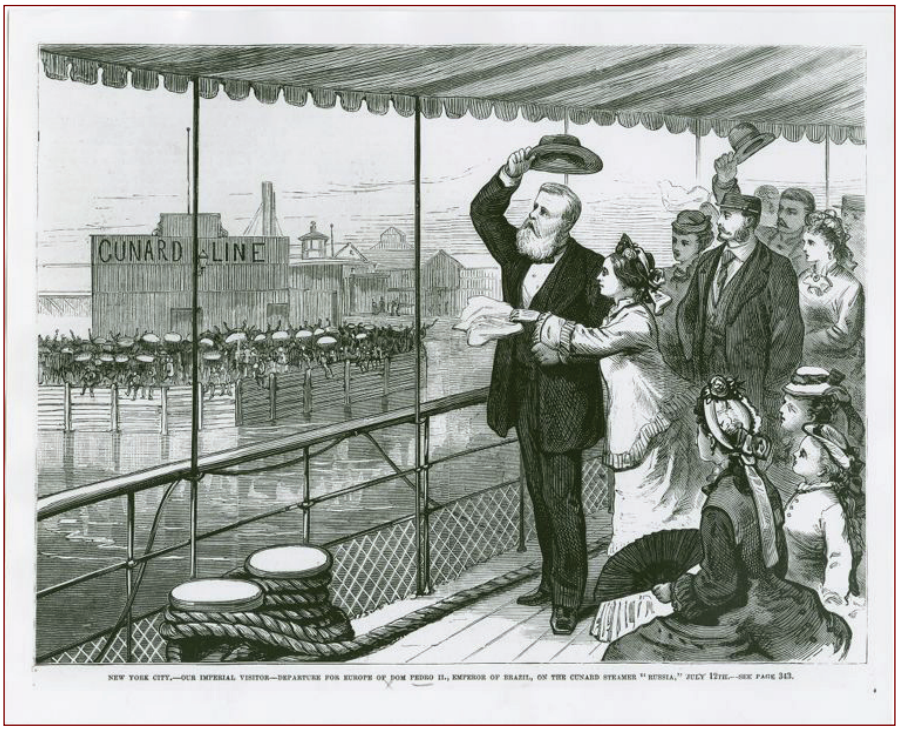

Figure 1: An illustration commonly identified as depicting Dom Pedro II departing New York aboard a Cunard Line steamer in July 1876, shown raising his hat in farewell as a crowd gathers on the pier below.[41]

These depictions both raise and answer the following question: if "old" royal fashions were no longer seen as progressive, then why focus on the travels of a monarch to arrive at an "aesthetics of progress"? The first

40 Max Weber's idea of an ethos of the bourgeoisie appears in his analysis of the development of the spirit of capitalism. Weber, Max. *Die protestantische Ethik und der "Geist" des Kapitalismus.* Leipzig: Reclam, 2017. Additionally, for a study on the attempt of the bourgeoisie to pursue aristocratic fashion, see: Perrot, Philippe. *Les dessus et les dessous de la bourgeoisie: Une histoire du vêtement au XIXe siècle.* Paris: Fayard, 1981.

41 "Scenes in His Life." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Available at: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8f52cce0-c597-012f-44ea-58d385a7bc34 (access: November 2025).

answer is that, as a monarch of a peripheral country, the emperor sought inclusion in the civilized world through the study of civilization and through performing as a progressive ruler. Second, because studies of modern monarchies offer rich reflections on performance, theatricality, and the representation of imperial politics.[42] Additionally, European monarchies provide several examples of the use of soft power in political encounters, royal pomp and diplomacy, and the fashioning of scenarios of power.[43] The self-fashioning of nationalizing and imperial monarchies throughout modern history is one of image and representation – a politico-aesthetic project. This does not imply that other political forms of government do not have their own aesthetics of power, but rather that, due to their reliance on symbolic authority, monarchies provide the most visible and codified displays of such aesthetic depictions.

I am talking here about aesthetics and its relation to society and politics in a broad anthropological sense. It appears through the study of sensations and experiences of power related to the legitimation of political and international systems of sovereignty by "*ritual, symbolism, custom, religious negotiation and conviction, and exchange – all of which contribute to the scaffolding – to the ways that the exercise of sovereignty relies on a theatrical, representational, and artistic dimension and plays a normative role in the social and cultural establishment of the beautiful.*"[44] I argue that monarchies offer exemplary case studies of these dimensions. Royal pomp is an evident example of such phenomena, but by the late 19th century even monarchs began to adopt new, non-royal forms of pomp to sustain symbolic sovereignty. Forms of public display, as noted by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite and co-authors, are not merely characterizations of styles of rule;

42 See, for example: Giloi, Eva, Martin Kohlrausch, Heikki Lempa, Heidi Mehrkens, Philipp Nilsen, Kevin Rogan, eds. *Staging Authority: Presentation and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe. A Handbook.* Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022.

43 Paulmann, Johannes. *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg.* Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000; Wortman, Richard S. *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006; Müller, Frank Lorenz, and Heidi Mehrkens, eds. *Royal Heirs and Uses of Soft Power in the Nineteenth-Century Europe.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

44 Ben-Dor Benite, Geroulanos, and Jerr, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*, 17.

they also account for forms of power regimes and the potential of their force. Therefore, one may infer that "[e]*ven the democratic pretense to an absence of theater and the rejection of ornate regalia enforce new kinds of revolutionary theatricality, oftentimes at the most basic levels – theatricality in new claims on sovereignty, in competitions over it, in appeals to it, in dreams played out through it.*"[45] I argue that the revolutionary aspects of theatricality, when coming from instances of imperial power, often dress up as disruptive but in fact serve the maintenance of the status quo.[46]

One could argue that, regarding the phenomenology of royal power, the visual aspects of monarchic sovereignty emerged earlier than its transformation into theatricality. The symbolism of the crown's rule started on the level of the sacred, with the monarch embodying power itself through a politico-theologico origin.[47] Clifford Geertz calls such symbolic elaborations of rule, charged with the aesthetics of authority, "royal progresses." Drawing examples from Elizabethan England, Java, and Morocco, Geertz illustrates how monarchs embodied sacred centrality. In the Moroccan case, as in Dom Pedro's, the king's image as a mobile, well-travelled man was "*a central element in his power; the realm was unified – to the very partial degree that it was unified and was a realm – by restless searching--out of contact, mostly agnostic, with literally hundreds of lesser centers of power within it.*"[48]

From Sylvain Maréchal's *The Last Judgement of Kings* (1793),[49] where monarchs perish in a revolutionary volcano, through Fascist, Nazi, and Soviet visions of global transformation, monarchies often figure as the

45 *Ibid.*, 20.

46 It is even more evident when we look at the instances of capitalist aesthetics. See: Weiss, Peter. *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Vol. 1. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005, 286–290.

47 Kantorowicz, Ernst. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

48 Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 2000, 138.

49 Perovic, Sanja. "Death by Volcano: Revolutionary Theatre and Marie-Antoinette." *French Studies*, 67/1 (2013), 15–29.

antithesis of futurist temporalities.[50] It is thus not intuitive to see an emperor as embodying progress in the wake of revolutionary upheavals. Yet the 1870s – at the height of the Second Industrial Revolution – were still marked by monarchical rule across much of Europe. Science was institutionalizing globally, in a world described as urbanized, globalized, or modernized – terms I avoid, since "progress" is already strongly associated with teleology.

Recent works on European monarchies argue that, in many ways, traditional arrangements concerning sovereignty, aesthetics, labor, and culture were still present during the 19th century. Part of this persistence is related to the symbolic nature of monarchic rule, where both the monarchy and the royals acted with resilience by wearing new clothes.[51] I interpret these new clothes – and Dom Pedro's activities and performances abroad – as new methods of presenting and representing monarchy and its sovereignty related to his belonging to the American continent.

From 1876 on, Dom Pedro adopted the unique characteristic of being an American, in the continental sense of the word. The Americans were thought to have a leading role in the future of world history and, accordingly, were expected to be civilized. In this context, Dom Pedro epitomized a singular form of monarchic style: he often set aside the pomp and ceremony of royalty in favor of a more civilian appearance, one that might be described as following a republican fashion.

He was distinguished by his scholarly tastes and achievements, which were described as "*a great deal, especially in a century which has had so many princes who were high and privileged vagabonds.*"[52]

50 Hartog, François. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

51 I refer here to the works of Palgrave Studies in Modern Monarchies collection, edited by Axel Körner, Heather Jones, Heidi Mehrkens, and Frank Lorenz Müller. See: Müller and Mehrkens, *Royal Heirs and the Uses of Soft Power in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*; Müller, Frank Lorenz. *Royal Heirs: Succession and the Future of Monarchy in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023; Glencross, Matthew, and Judith Rowbotham. *Monarchies and the Great War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; Hein-Kircher, Hanka, and Frank F. Sterkenburgh, eds. *Modernizing Europe's Imperial Monarchies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025.

52 "The Coming Emperor." *The New York Herald*, 7 April 1876.

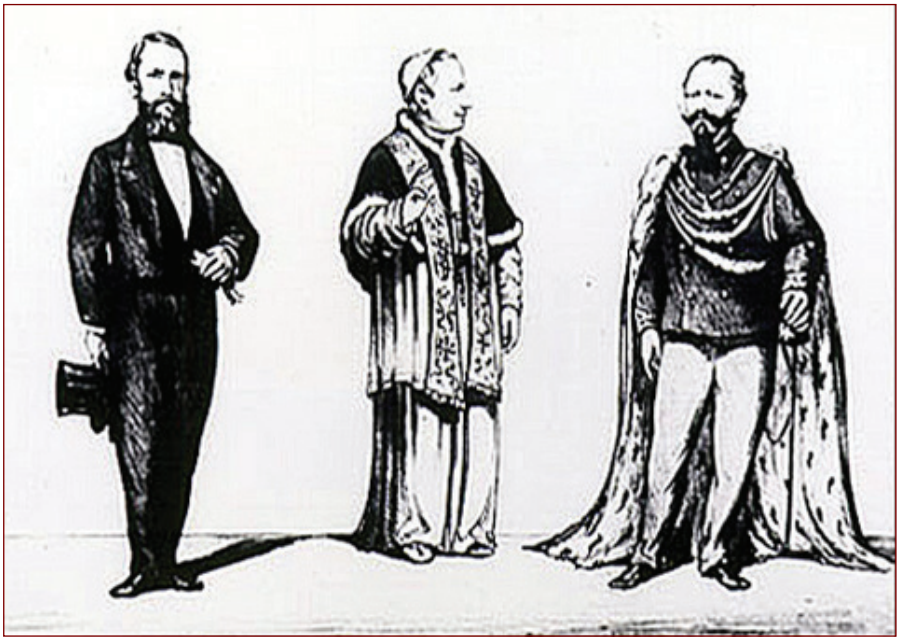

Figure 2: An illustration portraying Dom Pedro II, Pope Pius IX, and King Vittorio Emanuele II in their respective ceremonial fashions. Published on the day of King Vittorio Emanuele II's address inaugurating the second legislative session of the Italian Kingdom, the image contrasts the visual idioms of papal ritual, national unification, and the "American monarchy" associated with Dom Pedro II.[53]

Dom Pedro was not alone in this enterprise. Here we could mention the travels of other monarchs of the period, such as King Kalākaua of Hawaii, who traveled abroad in 1881, and Naser al-Din Shah of Persia, who did so in 1873, among others.[54] *O Commercio*, a Rio de Janeiro newspaper, celebrated the *bom gosto* ("tasteful fashion") of the Emperor Meiji of Japan, who abandoned rigid courtly formality for the European bourgeois style.[55] Dom Pedro similarly chose a civilian aesthetic style, a republican fashion, without abandoning monarchy altogether. Monarchs – and not only peripheral

53 "I Tre Sovrani presenti in Roma." *Don Pirloncino*, 53, 27 November 1871.

54 Sohrabi, Naghmeh. *Taken for Wonder: Nineteenth-Century Travel Accounts from Iran to Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 73; Motadel, David. "Global Monarchy: Royal Encounters in the Age of Empire." *The Historical Journal*, 67/3 (2024), 716.

55 *O Commercio*, 6 February 1872.

ones – who sought to leave behind what was considered outdated pomp and fashion for new forms of ceremony represented a notable trend. The ceremonies Dom Pedro chose to attend or invent were not only sites where progress was symbolized, they were performances of sovereignty aligned with a linear, processual, and future-oriented historical consciousness defined by movement, rupture, and change.

CEREMONIES OF CIVILIZATION AND THE KING'S NEW CLOTHES

The emperor's practice of visiting institutions that materialized and displayed progress (museums, universities, factories, etc.) attracted the attention of the international press, which took part in the fashioning and disseminating of his image. Moreover, his personal aversion to pompous royal ceremonies led him to adopt novel political rituals which would take place in institutions of progress and at events such as the International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine in Philadelphia, the Caxton Celebration in London, the opening of the Bayreuth Festival in Bavaria, and the Third International Congress of Orientalists in Saint Petersburg.[56] All these events carried their own ambivalences and temporalities, just like the progressive emperor of a country that was still socially and economically based on enslaved people's labor.

Dom Pedro's itinerary, centered on institutions, reflected his desire to observe firsthand the operation of schools, prisons, hospitals, factories, and telegraph centers. The US, where progress had ostensibly taken root in the Americas, was his first stop. Reporting on his intentions, *The New York Herald* wrote he would "*be permitted to see people and a land where such unprecedented strides in the science of government and in national progress had been made.*"[57]

56 Petter, "The Imperial Meteor," 55–73.

57 "Dom Pedro II." *The New York Herald*, 15 May 1872.

According to Dom Pedro, the man who travelled the world was Dom Pedro de Alcântara, as the emperor had stayed in Brazil, along with the burdens of protocol. By avoiding being hosted in palaces, being the official guest of state receptions, and engaging in royal ceremonialism, he embraced alternative forms of grandeur embedded in progressive aesthetics. He stayed in hotels, visited poets like Longfellow and Victor Hugo, and toured with artists and intellectuals. Yet he could not bypass the most symbolically charged event: the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia. This grand event embodied the republican ideals of the US, which presented itself as a friendly competition among nations. Dom Pedro's active participation in it illustrates that he did more than reject traditional rituals: he inserted himself into emerging public ceremonials that, while not monarchic, performed the aesthetics of progress.[58]

Upon the Centennial's opening ceremony on 10 May 1876, Dom Pedro and Empress Tereza Cristina sat in a grandstand before the Memorial Hall. There, the emperor was not sitting incognito among the Brazilian commissioners, as he had previously required. Sitting right next to the president and his wife, the Brazilian royal couple were protagonists in that spectacle.[59] The opening *Centennial March*, written by Richard Wagner, was followed by John Greenleaf Whittier's *Centennial Anthem*, both figures dear to Dom Pedro II. Yet, the "*hundred thousand people*" reported by newspapers eager to hear the music made crowd control nearly impossible.[60] The police struggled, and the emperor, despite his privileged position, could barely hear the orchestra, both impressed and irritated by the chaos.

Following the music, President Ulysses S. Grant, accompanied by the royal couple, led a ceremonial procession from Memorial to Machinery Hall. As they passed through the Main Building, they were flanked by the Philadelphia City Troops, in black-feathered helmets evoking a modern Roman cavalry, protecting them from the pressing crowds. Reporting for

58 For a general account of this event, see: McCabe, James D. *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition*. Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1876.

59 *Ibid.*, 286.

60 *Harper's Weekly*, 27 May 1876.

The New York Herald, James J. O'Kelly described how Dom Grant (as he ironically called the president) escorted the empress, while Dom Pedro led Mrs. Grant. In Machinery Hall, "*the President of the United States and the Emperor of Brazil ascended to the platform of the great Corliss*." George Henry Corliss, the inventor and Rhode Island commissioner, "*welcomed them and demonstrated how to activate the machine*."[61] The Corliss engine, a key innovation in US engineering, already three decades old, would power the entire fair. Its activation was chosen to symbolize the fair's commencement. "*The vast engine*," wrote O'Kelly, "*the largest in the world* [...] *an embodiment of the strength and character of the Saxon race, was revered not just for scale, but as a civilizational symbol.*"[62]

The spectacle offered the ideal opportunity for both rulers to play their roles. Dom Grant – as *The Herald* mocked the supposed despotism of President Grant in contrast to the progressive monarch – and his "brother the Emperor," as he called Dom Pedro in the opening speech, ascended to their positions at the platform that would give them access to the machinery.[63] Mr. Corliss placed President Grant at the left throttle and the Emperor of Brazil at the right. "*It does not often happen in a man's life*," he said, "*to station two rulers of such nations at their posts to await his command*." Surrounded by their wives and dignitaries, they stood before the mechanical colossus. Mr. Corliss asked, "*Are you both ready?*"[64] The emperor turned his handle first – steam surged, and the engine stirred. Then Grant followed, and the hall erupted with mechanical motion. At twenty minutes past one, the entire Machinery Hall came alive, as the opening ceremony concluded with the noise of the machinery. After the ceremony's temporal suspension, the homogeneous, empty time of progress was now put into motion for all participating nations, while electrical energy spread from the American ruler's hands to the various exhibition halls.[65]

61 McCabe, *The Illustrated History*, 304.

62 *The New York Herald*, 10 May 1876, 3.

63 *Orleans County Monitor*, 27 May 1876.

64 McCabe, *The Illustrated History*, 305.

65 *Ibid.*

Figure 3:
Illustration showing President Ulysses S. Grant and Emperor Dom Pedro II activating the Corliss steam engine at the opening of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Based on a sketch by the artist Theo. R. Davis, the image captures the ceremonial moment that inaugurated the machinery hall and signaled the start of the international exposition.[66]

Another illustrative "spectacle of civilization" was the Caxton Celebration, commemorating the 400th anniversary of England's first printed book, *The Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*, translated by Anthony Woodville, the Second Earl Rivers, and printed by William Caxton in 1477. Held as part of the Western International Exhibition at South Kensington, London, it featured books, newspapers, portraits, printing presses, and other artifacts tracing the history of the press.[67] Over the course of three months, it drew more than 23,000 visitors. Among the highlights was a Bible printed live by Oxford University: the first copy gifted to Queen Victoria, the second to William Ewart Gladstone, the former British Prime Minister, and one of the earliest to Dom Pedro II.[68]

The Caxton Celebration was more than a commemorative birthday; it celebrated a milestone in technological progress that had reshaped England. Gutenberg's 15th-century press transformed social, cultural, and religious life by making knowledge more widely accessible, primarily

66 "Our Centennial – President Grant and Dom Pedro Starting the Corliss Engine." *Harper's Weekly*, 27 May 1876. Library of Congress. Available at: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/89706312/ (access: September 2025).

67 *The Illustrated London News*, 7 July 1877, 18.

68 "The Caxton Celebration." *The Times*, 2 July 1877.

through vernacular publications. This accessibility bolstered the spread of Protestantism across Europe, positioning the printed Bible as both a religious and technological force. Yet, the initial revolution of the press was above all technological, centered on speed and mass reproduction.[69] For late 19th-century intellectuals, noble or bourgeois, such celebrations reflected their belief in uninterrupted national progress and the civilizing power of technology. More than 500 guests were reported to have visited the collection of rare books and antiquities. The universities of Cambridge, Ghent, Göttingen, and Oxford had sent their dignitaries. "*Among the most diligent,*" a paper noted, "*was the Emperor of Brazil, who allowed nothing of importance to escape his notice.*"[70] Dom Pedro moved among the intellectual elite as both peer and observer, carefully analyzing the exhibits. His gestures of close observation can be understood as aesthetic acts, contrasting the monarch's watchful gaze with the surrounding accumulation of artifacts, turning attention to detail into a performance of progress.

This was the symbol Dom Pedro embodied: a foreign monarch representing the speed of progress.[71] The printing of the Caxton Memorial Bible, commemorating the anniversary of England's first printed book and symbolically recalling the origins of printing, was a feat of acceleration. Only 16 hours before the opening of the event, neither the book nor its materials existed yet. Its production began at midnight, and by the morning, Oxford University had delivered several copies, one of which was gifted to the emperor. "*That shows*," the organizers declared, "*the state to which this great art is now happily arrived.*"[72] Practices of time discipline were, therefore, themselves aestheticized. Dom Pedro's deeds signified the beauty of punctuality and labor, qualities that replaced the splendor of costume as markers of the ruler's virtue.

69 Chartier, Roger. *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

70 "The Caxton Celebration."

71 *Ibid.*

72 "The Caxton Quatercentenary." *The Graphic*, 24 February 1877, 174.

The emperor, as pointed out by the press, had no time to lose. By the time of the formal toast, Dom Pedro had already left. The remaining luminary was Mr. Gladstone, received by Sir Charles Reed, a politician and member of the Society of Antiquaries. The crowd moved ritualistically to the Caxton Room, where Archbishop William Thomson of York, who was also a member of the Royal Geographical Society, delivered a celebratory prayer. After Gladstone formally opened the exhibition with "may it prosper," a series of modest toasts followed, accompanied by a performance from The Blues, the Royal Regiment of Horse Guards.[73] The first toast honored Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales, Prince Leopold, and the royal family for their patronage. Breaking decorum, Gladstone asked to toast the absent emperor: "*He is a man of whom I may say in his absence more freely than if he were here, that he is a model to the Sovereigns of the world in his anxiety for the faithful and effective discharge of his duties.*"[74] This report, published in *The Times*, echoed the emperor's image in British media, including satirical accounts, as a monarch defined by diligence and restless dedication to his travel duties.

In its coverage of the event, *The Illustrated London News* published an image of spectators watching the Caxton press demonstration, echoing a historic moment from the reign of King Edward IV and Queen Elizabeth Woodville. In place of Edward now stood Gladstone, British political figures, and the ubiquitous Emperor of Brazil.

73 *The Illustrated London News*, 18.

74 "The Caxton Celebration."

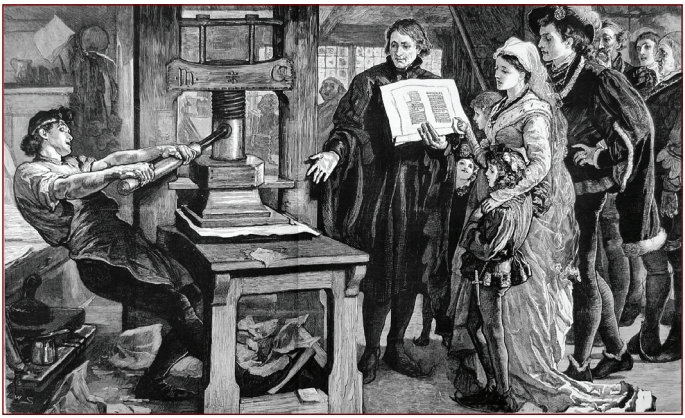

Figure 4: Illustration of William Caxton presenting examples of his early printed work to King Edward IV and Queen Elizabeth Woodville, published in connection with the Caxton Celebration honoring the origins of English printing.[75]

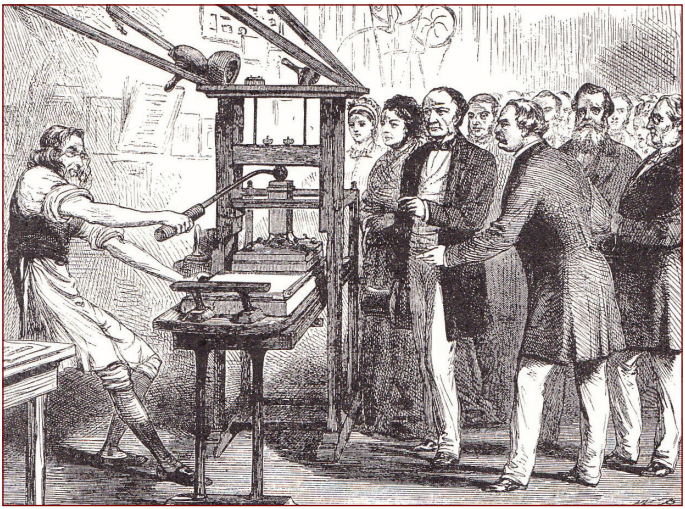

Figure 5: Illustration showing William Ewart Gladstone visiting the Caxton Memorial Exhibition at South Kensington in July 1877. The scene presents Gladstone among the displays commemorating William Caxton and the early history of English printing.[76]

75 "William Caxton, The First English Printer, Showing Printed Proofs to Edward IV." *Harper's Weekly*, 21 July 1877.

76 "Mr. Gladstone at the Caxton Memorial Exhibition, South Kensington." *Supplement to the Illustrated London News*, 17 July 1877.

The Times later published the exhibition's opening speech, in which Gladstone referred to Dom Pedro as a distinguished man:

> If I am to descend to lower, but still remarkable peculiarities, for Herculean perseverance and strength in the performance of labor, beginning, I believe, at about 4 o'clock in the morning, and ending very hard upon midnight. But that would be a small matter of praise to give if we did not consider the manner in which he consumes the 18 or 20 hours which form his ordinary day, and they are consumed in a succession of efforts to glean and gather through-out the world, from time to time, knowledge of [e]very kind which he may make useful on his return to his own country in promoting the health and happiness on his people. That is what I call, ladies and gentlemen, a great and good Sovereign, and a man who, by his conduct, enables [...] to make the station which he holds a pattern and blessing to his race.[77]

Gladstone, who had met the emperor before and whose policies and Homeric studies intrigued Dom Pedro, would later engage in a long and fascinating conversation with him in the late 1880s.[78] In his speech, Gladstone's remarks on the emperor's use of time echoed the exaggerated tone of the London press, but he also seized the moment to politicize Dom Pedro's distinctive timekeeping. The emperor's rigorous scholarship and disregard for ceremonial pomp were framed as expressions of a deeper aim: the advancement of his people. For Gladstone, the arts of knowledge and governance were mutually reinforcing, and Dom Pedro embodied this union.

The events presented above worked aesthetically by appealing to elements of sensory experience – sight, sound, material display, and symbolic gestures – that were allegorically associated with past practices and royal-centered traditions. At the same time, however, they were permeated by

77 Gladstone's speech, published by *The Times*, was transcribed by Heitor Lyra in the original English in an endnote. Lyra, Heitor. *História de Dom Pedro II do Brasil: 1825–1891*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1940–1942, 411.

78 Pedro II. "Entry of 6 February 1888." In: *Diário do Imperador (1840–1891)*, ed. Begonha Bediaga. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 1999.

the idea of a rupture with the past, with advancement and civic fashion that substituted for royal pomp, thereby integrating modern monarchic sovereignty into the aesthetics of progress.

CONCLUSION

Dom Pedro also participated in other spectacles of progress during his journey of 1876–1877. They included major events such as the opening of the Bayreuth Festival in Bavaria and the Third International Congress of Orientalists in Saint Petersburg, as well as world fairs and scholarly congresses, which reflected the cultural logic of national progress and the perfectioning process of universal history.[79] A full list is beyond the scope of this discussion, but his presence at these events corroborates the two cases discussed above. The emperor's mode of performing sovereignty was not about discarding ceremony but reconfiguring it. He integrated the monarchic image into new public rituals due to the growing dependence on public approval of one's rule.[80]

79 Petter, "The Imperial Meteor," 55–73.

80 It is crucial to point out that my claim is not that Dom Pedro acted alone or carefully considered each step, following the Machiavellian idea attached to the concept of performance as something "inauthentic," where each action stems from the monarch's individual genius and serves solely to enhance power. Instead, my understanding of performance considers the implications of the context in which he participates and how it would affect one's decisions, and how theatricality is particularly bound to monarchic sovereignty. Notwithstanding this, by studying the world tours of monarchs such as the Emperor of Brazil, one cannot deny how the steps and itineraries were thoughtfully and accurately calculated to serve specific purposes, and the great majority of them were clearly – intentionally, or not – related to the display of political power. I do not deny that the emperor, as it is readily apparent in his letters and diaries, had his own genuine interest in progress and personal reasons for adding specific steps to his itinerary, which did not necessarily have a causal relation to monarchic sovereignty. This is not to suggest that performance has an inherent negative connotation or that it is solely related to political power. For examples of other works following the same line, see: Skwirblies, Lisa. "Colonial Theatricality." In: Shirin M. Rai et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, 27–42. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021; Kear, Adrian. "Authenticity and Theatricality: World Spectatorship and the Drama of the Image." In: Shirin M. Rai et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, 57–72. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021; Daloz, Jean-Pascal. "Representation." In: Shirin M. Rai et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, 117–130. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

In the second half of the 19th century, therefore, the theatricality of monarchy extended beyond palaces to exhibitions, museums, theatres, and scientific congresses. To acquire international relevance, Dom Pedro embodied the ideal of a cosmopolitan citizen-emperor, journeying across the globe to observe, and to be observed; to compare, and to be the object of comparison; and to partake in the rituals of civilization. This transformation was not solely a matter of personal foresight, but reflected the specific cultural and political tensions of the age and how they were enframed as part of the world-picture. Monarchy was not a relic due to its seemingly outdated ceremonial character, but a dynamic institution that both shaped and was shaped by the century's transformations. Dom Pedro, informed by a teleological understanding that democracy and republicanism would take the place of the remaining monarchies in the Americas, exemplifies this process.

The new way Dom Pedro performed public monarchy was not to de-ceremonialize it, but rather to integrate it, through his own physical participation, into novel rituals. These occasions were marked by the absence of traditional royal pomp and ceremony. Still, they had their own formalities, which were linked to knowledge and the elevation of progress in the eyes of the public. They both depended upon and were the sponsors of the idea of universal history. The ceremonies of progress were thus occasions for the materialization of politics in the age of comparisons. Crucially, despite these displays of cosmopolitanism and ceremonial innovation, Brazil remained fundamentally a slaveholding society until the late 1880s, which reminds us that the performance of progress is not antithetical to entrenched social inequalities.

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POVZETEK

Članek preučuje, kako so se postrazsvetljenske filozofije zgodovine – obeležene s prevladujočimi linearnimi predstavami o napredku – estetsko utelešale v določenih dogodkih, institucijah in osebnostih poznega 19. stoletja. Na primeru potovanja Doma Pedra II., drugega in zadnjega brazilskega cesarja, v letih 1876–1877, članek pokaže, kako je bila monarhija na novo umeščena v globalne naracije napredka ter kako ta proces razkriva »estetiko napredka«.

Dom Pedrovo potovanje v tujino, osredotočeno na obiske muzejev, univerz, tovarn in svetovnih razstav, ga je postavilo tako v vlogo opazovalca kot v vlogo predmeta civilizacijskih primerjav tistega časa. Njegovo zavračanje vladarske pompoznosti v prid republikanski ali meščansko oblikovani podobi se je ujemalo z njegovim utelešenjem ideala učenega in kozmopolitskega vladarja. Ti estetski premiki so odražali širše spremembe v samopodobi monarhij, saj so vladarji po vsem svetu poskušali posnemati zahodne moderne družbe z novimi oblikami ritualov, ki niso več potekali v palačah ali drugih prostorih monarhij.

Skozi dogodke, kot so stoletna mednarodna razstava v Philadelphii, Caxtonova proslava v Londonu in otvoritev Wagnerjeve gledališke hiše v Bayreuthu, je Dom Pedro sodeloval pri »ceremonijalih civilizacije« – ritualih, ki so uprizarjali časovno logiko absolutnega napredka in opredeljevali suverenost skozi nove kulturne pojavne oblike. To pa ni pomenilo zatona monarhije, temveč njeno estetsko preoblikovanje v okvirih prevladujoče zakoreninjene svetovne podobe poznega 19. stoletja. Brazilski primer – primer države, ki jo je zaznamovala uporaba suženjskega dela – razkriva globoko ambivalentnost, ki je spremljala uprizarjanje, v katerem so ideali napredka sobivali z vztrajanjem družbenih neenakosti.

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Scaling Boundaries: Women, Mountaineering, and the Historical Ambivalence of the Female Body

Premikanje mej: ženske, gorništvo in zgodovinska ambivalenca ženskega telesa

Julija Šuligoj

ABSTRACT

The female body has been idealized, objectified, and burdened with contradictions throughout history. From ancient depictions to contemporary sports culture, it stands at the intersection of social norms and individual power. This paper explores the ambivalence toward the female body through the perspectives of medicine, art, and sports with an emphasis on mountaineering, highlighting how women, despite their achievements, faced and still face persistent scrutiny and bias. It focuses on the historical construction of the body, fashion's role, and how physical activity shaped perceptions of femininity. The analysis shows how enduring stereotypes influence women's participation in public life and sports to this day.

Keywords

female body, gender norms, objectification, sport, mountaineering, body history, feminism, bodily ambivalence

IZVLEČEK

Skozi vso zgodovino je bilo žensko telo idealizirano, objektificirano in obeleženo s protislovji. Od antičnih predstav do današnje športne kulture se žensko telo nahaja na presečišču med družbenimi normami in individualno avtonomijo. Članek raziskuje ambivalentnost odnosa do ženskega telesa z vidika medicine, umetnosti in športa, pri čemer se osredotoča na gorništvo, kjer so ženske bile, in so še vedno, kljub njihovim številnim dosežkom pogosto soočene z dvomi in predsodki o njihovih zmožnostih. Posebna pozornost je namenjena zgodovinski konstituciji telesa, vlogi mode ter vplivu športne dejavnosti na pojmovanje ženskosti. Analiza razkriva, kako stereotipi o ženskem telesu še danes vplivajo na vključevanje žensk v javno življenje in šport.

Ključne besede

žensko telo, družbene norme spola, objektifikacija, šport, gorništvo, zgodovina telesa, feminizem, telesna ambivalenca

INTRODUCTION

Given that the body serves as the primary and most immediate aspect of human appearance during initial encounters, individuals have historically evaluated one another based on physical attributes, as they still do today. Scientifically speaking, medical professionals based on the socio-biological approach define the body as a field of existence with its own nature and boundaries, while social scientists, based on the constructivist approach, argue that the body is fully socially and culturally constructed.[1]

From a constructivist perspective, evaluations of the female body reveal a mixture of contradictions that are deeply rooted in societal norms. This tension becomes particularly visible through feminist readings of the body, which interpret these contradictions as expressions of the male gaze that defines socially acceptable ideals of the female body. For instance, today we see the coexistence of the body positivity movement with the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Beyond the realm of popular culture, explorations of the female body encompass various domains such as art, literature, medicine, and social norms, revealing complex attitudes toward femininity, sexuality, and women's roles.

Within this broader context, sport stands out as a striking example where the regulation and scrutiny of women's bodies are particularly evident. The 2024 Olympic Games provide a recent illustration, with debates over sex and gender eligibility centering on boxers and their natural testosterone levels.

In this article, I explore how ambivalence both surrounds and is directed at the female body, reflecting complex social and cultural attitudes. Because as:

> The fruit of both a social and cultural context, the body is permanently under the yoke of normative representations and discourses. Simultaneously relating

1 Canatan, Kadir. "Preface." In: *Body Sociology*, ed. Kadir Canatan, 15–20. İstanbul: Açılım Publishing, 2011.

> to the biological, the social, and the intimate, it is a mediator between an individual and society. It personifies the individual, and is controlled by social norms that govern its appearance and attitude.[2]

The article begins by discussing feminist perspectives on this subject and providing a historical overview of the treatment of the female body across different periods. It proceeds to link this theme to sport, particularly to mountaineering. Female mountaineers were, and still are, both celebrated for their achievements and scrutinized for their appearance and conformity to traditional notions of femininity.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF THE FEMALE BODY

The analysis of the body has a long history in feminist thought. To frame my discussion, I begin with a brief overview of some of the main authors who have contributed to this field, which provides essential context for understanding the complex social, cultural, and historical constructions of the female body.

Early feminist engagements with the body were shaped by seminal works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), where the female body is conceptualized as a key site of cultural inscription and as a marker of woman's position as the "Other." Arguing that women are not born but made through social and cultural conditioning, Beauvoir reveals that it is not biological difference itself, but its social interpretation, that underpins women's subordination.[3]

Building on this foundation, later authors developed distinct critical perspectives. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), examines how cultural ideals of beauty and bodily appearance operate as mechanisms of disci-

2 Malivin, Amandine. "The Gendered Body in Europe: Between Constraint and Emancipation." 22 June 2020. Available at: https://ehne.fr/en/node/12241 (access: May 2025).

3 Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953. (Originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949.)

pline and social regulation. Wolf argues that as women gained social and political power, beauty standards intensified, working to maintain patriarchal control through the internalization of unattainable ideals.[4] Elizabeth Grosz, particularly in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), advances a poststructuralist account of the body as fluid, material, and discursively constituted. For Grosz, the body is not a passive object shaped by culture but an active, dynamic participant in the production of meaning and subjectivity.[5] These contributions established the groundwork for feminist analyses of embodiment, providing a framework that continues to inform contemporary scholarship at the intersections of gender studies, cultural theory, and critical philosophy.

Expanding on this theoretical foundation, Rose Weitz situates the female body within historical and social contexts, demonstrating how cultural, legal, and scientific discourses have shaped perceptions of women's bodies over time. Tracing these influences from antiquity to the present, she highlights how sexual double standards, Darwinian notions of dimorphism, and socially sanctioned emotional norms have reinforced gendered hierarchies and prescribed roles. In doing so, Weitz connects historical patterns of subordination to contemporary discussions of embodiment, showing how these enduring frameworks continue to influence social expectations and the regulation of women's behavior and bodies.[6]

Contemporary feminist scholarship additionally emphasizes the interplay between power, culture, and the lived experience of the body. Scholars such as Susan Bordo and Judith Butler have interrogated how social norms, media representations, and performative practices shape both the perception and regulation of female bodies. Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), examines how cultural ideals of thinness and bodily discipline fun-

4 Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: William Morrow, 1991.

5 Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

6 Weitz, Rose, ed. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Third ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

ction as tools of social control, showing that women's struggles with body image often reflect broader dynamics of power and resistance.[7] Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), challenges fixed notions of sex and gender, proposing that gender is performative – created and sustained through repeated social acts rather than rooted in biology.[8] Their work highlights the body as an active site of social and political inscription. Contemporary approaches also incorporate intersectional perspectives, recognizing that race, class, sexuality, and disability intersect with gender to produce diverse experiences of embodiment.

Together, these developments underscore the complex, contested nature of the female body and provide a critical lens for examining ambivalence in domains such as sport, physical culture, and mountaineering.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE (FEMALE) BODY

The feminist rethinking of embodiment builds upon – and often reacts against – long-standing historical understandings of the body. Over the course of history, the human body has been the subject of observation and study, with early scientific understandings recognizing the differences between male and female bodies. Initially, these differences were interpreted through a hierarchical lens, with the female body seen as an inferior version of the male. In antiquity, it was commonly believed that women possessed the same genitalia as men, only inverted.[9] Galen famously asserted that women have exactly the same organs as men, but in exactly the wrong places.[10] Thomas W. Laqueur described this framework as the

7 Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

8 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

9 Nemesius of Emesa. *On the Nature of Man*. Ed. and trans. William Tefler. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955, 369.

10 Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, 26.

"one-sex model," where only one sex exists, with the male serving as the paradigm.[11]

The Greeks (through Aristotle's theories), associated body temperature with social status, viewing warm bodies as emblematic of strength and health, particularly in men. This perception led to gender discrimination, where women, considered colder and thus weaker, were marginalized and expected to remain covered and excluded from public life. Additionally, the belief that fetal warmth influenced gender outcomes reinforced these biases, positioning female bodies as inherently inferior.[12]

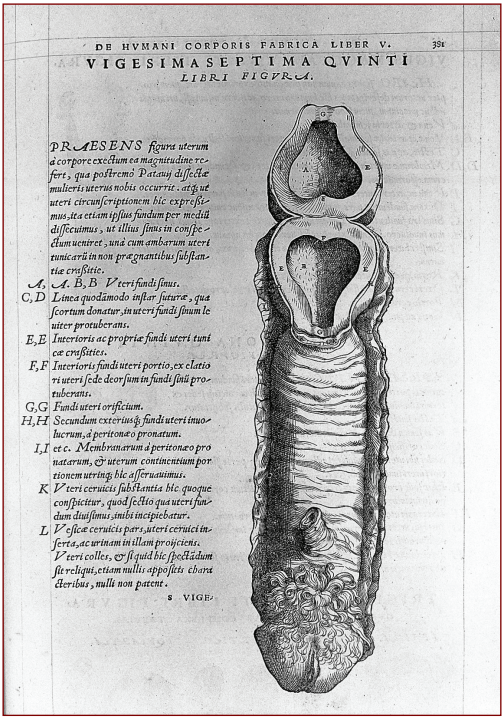

Figure 1: An anatomical depiction of the female reproductive organs by Vesalius, historically interpreted as reflecting residual Galenic ideas of the female body as an "inverted" form within the one-sex model.[13]

It is important to note that such conceptions of bodily difference were not confined to philosophical or medical thought but also had concrete social and legal consequences. Assertions of inferiority reinforced the notion that men could overpower and control women,

11 *Ibid.*

12 Sennett, Richard. *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. İstanbul: Metis Publishing, 2011.

13 "Vesalius 'De humani corporis fabrica,' 1543; Illustration of a Uterus." Wikimedia Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesalius_%22De_humani...%22,_1543;_illustration_of_a_uterus_Wellcome_L0015865.jpg (access: November 2025).

including within the legal sphere. As Weitz observes, "*the law typically has defined women's bodies as men's property.*"[14] The situation was thus reciprocal: women were regarded as property because their bodies were perceived as inferior, and "*women's legal status as property reflected the belief that women's bodies were inherently different from men's in ways that made women both defective and dangerous.*"[15]

During the Middle Ages, Christian beliefs significantly shaped perceptions of the body. The body temperature theory was rejected. Now, all bodies were "*the same body in the eyes of God; they were neither fairer, nor uglier, nor superior, nor inferior.*"[16] Attitudes toward the female body in those times were paradoxical: women were celebrated as paragons of virtue (Virgin Mary) yet simultaneously viewed as sources of temptation (Eve). While women's bodies were idealized in artistic representations, they were objectified in societal contexts.

Advances in medicine and new knowledge of anatomy changed the perception of human bodies. Additionally, the idea of the similarity of the male and female genitalia in ancient Greece and Rome was gradually abandoned, and a view that emphasized differences started to be accepted. This view led to the opinion that the social roles of men and women were also different. "*The belief that the advancement of civilization strengthens the difference between men and women is embedded in the idea of role separation.*"[17]

By the early 19th century, the one-sex view had shifted to what Laqueur termed the "two-sex model," in which male and female bodies were understood as biologically distinct and incommensurable.[18] Jacques-Louis

14 Weitz, Rose. "A History of Women's Bodies." In: *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, ed. Rose Weitz. Third ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 3.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Doğan, Neva. "The Image of the Body in Its Historical Transformation." *Contemporary Issues of Communication*, 1/1 (2022), 31–45.

17 Gélis, Jacques. "The Body, the Church, and the Sacred." In: *History of the Body*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, 17–73. İstanbul: YKY, 2008, 120.

18 Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 153.

Moreau, one of the pioneers of early psychiatry, fervently argued against the earlier conception of women in relation to men. He declared: "*Not only are the sexes different, but they are different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect. To the physician or the naturalist, the relation of woman to man is a series of oppositions and contrasts.*"[19]

In the Victorian era, two ideal and totally opposed types were established. The ideal for men was to have a muscular and hairy body and a deep voice. The ideal for women was the opposite, as their bodies were seen through the lens of sexual modesty and fragility, and thus they should have a high voice, and a small and sleek body without hair.[20] Of course, these criteria included only white, able-bodied, heterosexual individuals.

The Victorian era also gave rise to the idea of separate spheres, where women were associated with the private, domestic realm, while men occupied the public sphere.[21] Women were thus intended to be passive. This divide extended to medical thinking as well. Any deviation from the perfect body type would be explained by a dysfunction of reproductive organs. Women's health problems, particularly those related to the reproductive system, were often seen as linked to their emotional or moral state, leading to diagnoses such as hysteria. A common treatment for women with hysteria or nervous conditions was enforced rest, which further reinforced the belief that women's bodies were inherently weak and required constant management.[22]

19 Moreau, Jacques-Louis. *Histoire naturelle de la femme.* Vol. 1. Paris: L. Duprat, 1803.

20 As Weitz observes, it was similar in American society: "*women's bodies as ill or fragile* [...] *white middle--class women were unable to sustain the responsibilities of political power or the burden of education or employment.*" Weitz, "A History of Women's Bodies," 6.

21 Similar concerns about the physical and social constraints imposed on women can be found in other contexts: "*To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles* [...] *artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action.*" Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* London: J. Johnson, 1792, 29.

22 Cohut, Maria. "The Controversy of 'Female Hysteria'." 13 October 2020. Available at: https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/the-controversy-of-female-hysteria (access: May 2025).

"Society thus did everything it could to control the body and make it conform to gender norms. Identity was simultaneously visible on the body, as well as based on it."[23] That is why in late 19th-century Europe, the ideal body weight or shape became a concern primarily for the middle class, perpetuating the notion of the bourgeois "tyranny of thinness" over women.[24]

The 20th century witnessed significant progress in women's rights, as feminist movements and socio-political upheavals transformed perceptions of the female body. Feminist rhetoric, drawing on liberal ideas and the civil rights movement, argued that women's bodies were fundamentally similar to men's, and therefore that equality should be extended within existing social structures.[25]

This emphasis on similarity was later challenged by approaches that celebrated women's distinct qualities.

> In contrast, a more recent strand of feminist thought, known as 'cultural feminism', has re-emphasized the idea of inherent differences between men and women. Unlike those who made this argument in the past, however, cultural feminists argue that women's bodies (as well as their minds and moral values) are superior to men's. From this perspective, women's ability to create human life makes women (especially mothers) innately more pacifistic, loving, moral, creative, and life-affirming than men.[26]

These rhetorical shifts, while contributing to significant social change, also generated new challenges and ambivalences. On the one hand, women gained greater freedom in dress and public presence; on the other, societal pressures surrounding thinness, beauty standards, and sexualization persisted. For instance, advances in reproductive rights and medical access empowered women to control their bodies, while debates over

23 Malivin, "The Gendered Body in Europe."

24 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

25 Weitz, "A History of Women's Bodies," 8–10.

26 *Ibid.*, 8.

contraception and abortion highlighted ongoing tensions between autonomy and social norms.

The political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, along with their prescribed gender roles, were fundamentally shaped by these "facts" about their bodies. These beliefs served as "*the epistemic foundations for prescriptive claims about the social order.*"[27]

HOW CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S BODIES HAVE SHAPED THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

The changing attitudes toward the female body are particularly visible in the realm of sports, a context in which norms surrounding gender, physicality, and performance are both produced and contested. A recent example of debates over women's bodies in sports occurred at the 2024 Paris Olympics, where controversies over gender eligibility in boxing arose. The Algerian boxer Imane Khelif was at the center of the debate after her opponent withdrew just 46 seconds into their match, following Khelif's earlier disqualification at the 2023 World Championships over alleged elevated testosterone levels, which she denied.[28] However, these debates are far from new.

According to Allen Guttmann, culture – not biology – accounts for most, if not all, of the gender differences observed throughout sports history. For instance, Greek culture exhibited striking ambivalence toward women's involvement in athletics: while Athenian women were largely excluded from political and military activities and confined to domestic roles, Spartan women excelled in athletic competitions and were required to undergo rigorous training. This example supports Guttmann's thesis that sports represent a key to understanding gender and the position of women in society. In Sparta, women enjoyed greater freedom and more rights

27 Moreau, *Histoire naturelle de la femme*, vol. 1, 15.

28 Khelif, Imane. "'I Am a Woman': Imane Khelif Hits Back in Gender Row after Claiming Gold." *The Guardian*, 10 August 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/sport/article/2024/aug/10/i-am-a--woman-imane-khelif-hits-back-in-gender-row-after-claiming-gold (access: September 2025).

compared to their Athenian counterparts. Their participation in sports both reflected and reinforced this freedom, confirming the reciprocal relationship: they were freer because of their involvement in athletics, and they could participate in sports because they were freer.[29]

As the examples from antiquity illustrate, the female body was not well understood, but it was consistently controlled and shaped by religious and cultural beliefs that varied across time and space. That practice continued into the Middle Ages. Although formal opportunities for women to participate in organized sport were limited, they were by no means entirely excluded from physical activity. Women engaged in informal games, dances, and physical labor, and in certain aristocratic contexts they participated in hunting, riding, and other pursuits. In addition, some women practiced swimming, archery, and even ball games, often in private or semi-private settings. However, such activities were closely regulated by social norms, religious authorities, and local laws, which sought to restrict women's mobility, enforce modesty, and prevent behaviors deemed unbecoming or dangerous.[30]

The Victorian era, as previously noted, emphasized even stricter gender norms and bodily regulation, which also shaped women's involvement in sport. In the 19th century, women's bodies were objectified and regulated by social standards, emphasizing thinness, fragility, and paleness, all of which also affected their participation in sports. In contrast, the idealized male sporting body was portrayed as strong, aggressive, and muscular, serving as a symbol of masculinity against which women, characterized as relatively powerless and inferior, were and still are measured.[31] Muscularity on the female body was not considered a beauty ideal, but rather the opposite. Concerns also emerged that rigorous physical activities like mountaineering could have potentially detrimental effects on women's supposedly delicate constitutions and mental well-being, with a belief that such

29 Guttmann, Allen. *Women's Sports: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

30 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

31 Hargreaves, Jennifer. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. London: Routledge, 1994, 145–146.

extreme physical activity could damage women's "weaker" bodies and their "fragile" minds.[32]

In the 20th century, during the interwar years, although sportswomen became more athletically inclined, influential ideological assumptions persisted regarding the detrimental effects of exercise on the female body. The expansion of women's sports and the growing visibility of the female body's form and sexuality – particularly during the second half of the 20th century – became increasingly tied to the commercialization of female athleticism and sexuality. As Jennifer Hargreaves aptly notes: "*image-making is the cult of modern capitalism; it reflects the obsession about the body which affects modes of everyday life and personal responses.*"[33] Despite the empowerment associated with strength, muscularity, and athletic skill for men, these attributes were often devalued or denigrated for women. Even by the end of the 20th century, sportswomen felt pressured to present popular images of femininity to avoid being labelled as having "unwomanly" physique. Sport thus continued to challenge traditional notions of femininity, while traditional notions of femininity also challenged women's access to sports.[34]

Although these contradictions persisted, Bordo highlights a shift in perceptions toward the athletic and muscular image of femininity, solid and bulky-looking, which started to become increasingly more desirable around the late 20th century and has continued into the 21st century.[35] The body studies scholar argues that this shift can be attributed to the preference for tautness and containment over thinness, as any form of excess, sagginess, or wrinkling detracts from its line and firm appearance. As already mentioned, historically, muscularity has been linked with masculinity; however, by the end of the 20th century, it became more glamorized and sexualized. Representations of the female athletic body, muscular yet feminine (e.g.

32 Libbon, Stephanie E. "Pathologizing the Female Body: Phallocentrism in Western Science." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8/4 (2007), 79–92.

33 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 158.

34 *Ibid.*, 164.

35 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

Jane Fonda with her workout programs), symbolized empowerment and offered an escape from traditional notions of femininity and domesticity.[36]

As these examples illustrate, the evolving social attitudes toward the female body have consistently been mirrored in the realm of sports, where cultural norms and anxieties around femininity are both reflected and reinforced. This ongoing negotiation of femininity and the athletic body also extended beyond performance to appearance, laying the groundwork for how cultural expectations around gender and clothing would shape women's participation in physically demanding activities, as explored in the next chapter on the example of mountaineering.

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, CLOTHING, AND MOUNTAINEERING

Another important dimension of the shifting attitudes toward the female body can be found in the realm of clothing, as the norms of Western society were also reflected in the way clothes were deemed socially appropriate. Men wore pants, women skirts. Furthermore, clothes represented another type of oppression for women. "*In the 19th century, with the influence of Christianity, it was forbidden for women to show their thighs, even their ankles.*"[37]

However, restrictions on women's appearance extended beyond the expectation to cover the body. The corset, for example, was a central element of women's clothing during the Victorian era, with the majority of middle-class women and many working-class women wearing it regularly. It played a crucial role in achieving the desired feminine figure, tightening the waist while keeping other parts of the body full. This ideal shape was intertwined with broader societal expectations of femininity, which emphasized self-discipline, control of one's appetite, and associated a small waist with wealth and social status. "*It is this link to self-regulation that led people*

36 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 146, 161.

37 Doğan, "The Image of the Body," 37

to see the corset as the ultimate symbol, and indeed instrument, of female oppression."[38]

Figure 2: This photograph of a woman in a corset depicts the idealized Victorian beauty, emphasizing a cinched waist and elegant posture, while also reflecting the constraints of this idealized body, as beauty was often achieved through uncomfortable clothing.[39]

The criteria for appropriate clothing were, of course, also reflected in sport. Mountaineering presents a particularly interesting site for examining

38 Aspinall, Hannah. "The Fetishization and Objectification of the Female Body in Victorian Culture." *brightONLINE: Student Literary Journal*, University of Brighton. 10 August 2012. Available at: http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-two/the-fetishization-and-objectification-of-the-female-body-in-victorian-culture (access: May 2025).

39 "Art: Portrait of Woman Wearing Corset." Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. [c. 1899]. Available at: https://www.learner.org/series/art-through-time-a-global-view/the-body/portrait-of-woman-wearing-corset/ (access: November 2025).

the intersection of gender, sport, and clothing, as it brings the female body into confrontation with a domain traditionally associated with masculine strength. In mountaineering that meant wearing corsets and skirts to the unwelcoming mountain environment. Nineteenth-century photographs depict pioneers such as Marie Paradis and Lucy Walker ascending Europe's highest mountains in skirts, despite the sheer impracticality. Mountaineering in such attire was arduous: corsets restricted breathing, the heavy skirts got in the way, weighing even more if they became wet and then froze.[40] Women improvised by making some adaptations, such as, for example, not lacing the corsets tight. For the skirts they had various options: "*They could jimmy-rig small hoops within the fabric of a skirt and hoist the skirt to the length needed to climb a mountain, bravely stash the skirt behind a rock to be retrieved upon completion of the climb, or mountaineer in a potentially dangerous floor-length dress.*"[41] Such improvised strategies expose the tension between the symbolic maintenance of femininity and the lived realities of physical endurance.

Over time, clothing was adapted to meet the challenges of climbing while adhering to evolving notions of femininity. In the early 20th century, women mountaineers modified their attire for functionality over modesty. Climbing clubs provided opportunities for more practical clothing choices like shorts and tight pants, enabling more effective climbing.[42] In general, bodies became freer during the 20th century. After the First World War, the corset was rejected, women cut their hair, skirts became shorter, and heels grew longer starting in the 1930s.[43]

40 Brown, Rebecca. *Women on High: Pioneers of Mountaineering.* Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2002, 21.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Gunn, Natalie. "Women and Gender in Mountaineering and Climbing." Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 2023, 21–23.

43 Malivin, "The Gendered Body in Europe."

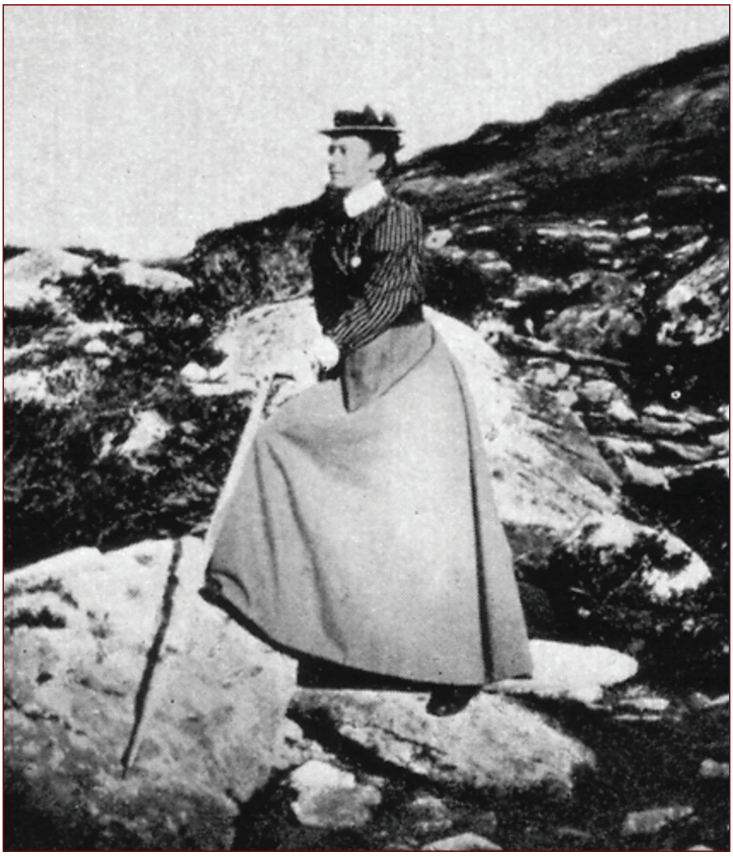

Figure 3: In the 19th century, women wore skirts to the mountains. The photograph shows Margaret Jackson, an English mountain climber.[44]

BETWEEN ADMIRATION AND RESTRICTION: AMBIVALENT VIEWS OF WOMEN IN MOUNTAINEERING

The belief that women's bodies were fragile and had to be taken special care of was clearly seen in mountaineering. However, we can also see an ambivalence in the perception of women in the mountaineering commu-

44 "Margaret Jackson." [c. 1880]. Wikimedia Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Margaret_Jackson,_alpinist.jpg (access: September 2025).

nity. A text from 1907 reads: "*A man hates a 'mannish' woman; but when a slight girl equals him at his favorite sport and yet retains her womanliness, he readily admits her claim to a place 'on the rope', and admires her greatly in consequence.*"[45]

We can observe more of this attitude in the obituaries published in contemporary journals, although only the best performing females deserved those, of course. When written by men, they reveal gender-biases: "*they describe these women as so excellent that they surpass not only all other women but also most men. At this point of exceptionality, one could say that they no longer truly fall into the category of women.*"[46] They are described as persons with, on the one hand, incredible physical and mental skills, which were perceived as male qualities, and, on the other, with a fragile female constitution. Gertrude Bell, a British archaeologist, writer, and political officer known for her expertise in Middle Eastern culture and diplomacy in the early 20th century, and also a mountaineer, is described with this ambivalent attitude. Her exceptionality is based on the contrast between her slender morphology and her physical and mental qualities, all described as masculine:

> Her strength, incredible in that slim frame, her endurance, above all her courage, were so great that even to this day her guide [...] speaks with an admiration of her that amounts to veneration. He told the writer, some years ago, that of all the amateurs, men or women, that he had travelled with, he had seen but very few to surpass her in technical skill and none to equal her in coolness, bravery, and judgment.[47]

Male admiration hinged on a delicate balance: a woman who appeared overly masculine was dismissed, yet a woman who remained modest

45 "A Ladies' Week at Wastdale." *Journal of the Fell and Rock-Climbing Club of the English Lake District*, 1/1 (1907), 190–191.

46 Moraldo, Delphine. "Women and Excellence in Mountaineering from the Nineteenth Century to the Present." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 37/9 (2020), 732. https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2020.1819250 (access: May 2025).

47 Strutt, Edward L. "In Memoriam Gertrude Bell (1868–1926)." *Alpine Journal*, 39 (1927), 297–299.

and seemingly fragile while accomplishing remarkable feats in mountaineering was seen as extraordinary and worthy of genuine admiration.[48]

Throughout the 20th century, more and more climbers offered encouragement, but sometimes that was in a patronizing way. Nicholas Jaeger, for example, states that "*the history of mountaineering presents us with some remarkable women,*" but quickly adds that "*mountaineering may not be particularly adapted to the psyche of most women* [...] *none of them could ever pretend to play the leading roles.*"[49] Such remarks reveal how admiration could coexist with exclusion: women were praised as anomalies, yet simultaneously denied full legitimacy within the mountaineering community.

CONCLUSION

The female body has long been idealized, objectified, and fetishized as "*social rules and guidelines on how the female body should look, and how it should be dressed, objectified the body and encoded femininity within these rules. This made the portrayal of the female body a space for expression, oppression and sexual commodification.*"[50] This societal ambivalence toward the female body throughout history is particularly evident in the exploration of women's roles in mountaineering and sports. Accounts of these experiences reveal a complex interplay of admiration and scrutiny, reflecting deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward women's bodies and capabilities. Although women have made significant strides in these fields, they have often been subjected to biases that shape perceptions of their achievements. Understanding this historical context is essential for recognizing how stereotypes have persisted and evolved over time.

The history of shifting attitudes toward the female body should therefore not be understood as one of linear progress. Rather, it demonstrates that

48 Moraldo, "Women and Excellence," 732.

49 Jaeger, Nicolas. *Carnets de solitude*. Paris: Denoël, 1979, 95.

50 Aspinall, "Fetishization and Objectification."

transformation often carries both liberation and constraint: as new freedoms emerge, so too do new forms of regulation and expectation. Despite this overall pattern, the second half of the 20th century brought significant changes through feminist movements and social transformations. New challenges and forms of ambivalence remain, but these developments represent important advances in the social and symbolic recognition of women's bodies. Examining these narratives allows us to both appreciate the contributions of women in mountaineering and sports, and recognize the enduring impact of societal norms on their experiences.

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava zgodovinsko in sodobno ambivalentnost v odnosu do ženskega telesa, ki je hkrati prostor občudovanja in družbenega nadzora. Orisu feminističnih pogledov in zgodovinskega razvoja obravnave ženskega telesa sledi navezava na šport in v teh okvirih na gorništvo.

Kritične obravnave ženskega telesa izhajajo iz del feminističnih avtoric, kot so Simone de Beauvoir, Naomi Wolf, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler in drugih, ki so pokazale, da je žensko telo ujeto v mreže družbenih norm, oblasti, medijskih reprezentacij in kulturnih pričakovanj. Sodobni feministični pristopi opozarjajo tudi na presečišča spola z raso in razredom.

Zgodovinski pregled pokaže, da so bila pojmovanja ženskega telesa vedno prežeta z oblastjo in dominacijo. Od antičnega »modela enega spola«, ki je žensko opredelilo kot nepopolno različico moškega, do srednjeveških krščanskih predstav ter kasnejšega »modela dveh spolov« za razumevanje bioloških razlik, povsod so bila ženska telesa prikazana kot šibkejša, bolj omejena in neprimerna za javno življenje.

Na področju športa so ta prepričanja močno zaznamovala dostop žensk do telesnih aktivnosti. Primeri iz antike, srednjega veka, viktorijanske dobe in 20. stoletja kažejo, da je bilo vključevanje žensk zamejeno zaradi medicinskih predsodkov, moralnih norm in strahov pred izgubo »ženskosti«. Te napetosti so prisotne tudi v sodobnosti, kot je razvidno iz razprave o regulaciji spola v boksu na Olimpijskih igrah leta 2024.

V dejavnosti gorništva se posebej dobro razkrije, kako se žensko telo sooča s področjem, ki je zgodovinsko dojeto kot moško, kar omogoči natančen vpogled v preplet spola, športa in oblačil. Kljub nespodbudnim družbenim normam so nekatere ženske dosegale izjemne dosežke, a so njihove zmožnosti pogosto opisovali z ambivalentnimi podtoni. Občudovanje teh planink je bilo pogojeno z občutljivim ravnotežjem med močjo oziroma oblastjo in ženskostjo.

Članek sklene, da se odnos do ženskega telesa skozi zgodovino ni linearno izboljševal, temveč je napredku pogosto sledila nova oblika nadzora. Razumevanje teh zgodovinskih vzorcev omogoča kritičen pogled na sodobne prakse in večje priznanje prispevkov žensk v športu in gorništvu.

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Student Reading Associations During Post-Revolutionary Neoabsolutism[1]

Študentska bralna društva v času postrevolucionarnega neoabsolutizma

Miroslav Vašík

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ABSTRACT

How did student associations survive under Austria's harsh post-1848 regime? This article reveals how two student groups in Prague – one Czech, one German – adapted to heavy state control while preserving their educational and cultural goals. Despite censorship, surveillance, and shrinking membership, these associations navigated legal loopholes and shifting policies to maintain a fragile civic presence. Their story challenges the idea that the 1850s were a purely repressive era and highlights how civic life endured even under neoabsolutism.

Keywords

students, student associations, Prague, neoabsolutism, revolution of 1848, Habsburg monarchy, reading association, national conflict

IZVLEČEK

Kako so študentska društva preživela pod ostrim avstrijskim režimom po letu 1848? Članek razkriva, kako sta se dve študentski društvi v Pragi – eno češko, drugo nemško – prilagodili strogemu državnemu nadzoru in hkrati ohranili svoje izobraževalne in kulturne cilje. Kljub cenzuri, nadzoru in upadanju članstva sta ti dve društvi iskali zakonite možnosti za delovanje in se odzivali na spreminjajoče se politične okoliščine. Obstoj takšnih primerov postavlja pod vprašaj predstavo, da so bila petdeseta leta 19. stoletja zgolj obdobje represije, in izkazuje, da se je civilno življenje ohranjalo tudi pod neoabsolutistično oblastjo.

Ključne besede

študenti, študentska društva, Praga, neoabsolutizem, revolucija 1848, habsburška monarhija, bralno društvo, narodni konflikt

INTRODUCTION

Naučný slovník, the first public Czech encyclopedia published during the 1860s and 1870s, defined the term "Spolek" (association) as the necessity of people uniting to accomplish their goals. It also described the negative attitude of the post-revolutionary neoabsolutist regime toward associations. The author of the entry presented the typically very critical position toward the neoabsolutist regime: in his opinion, the associations were an important part of citizens' rights.[2] In many ways, this reflects how historiography has often described the 1850s: as a decade of repression and the restriction of civil life.

However, the picture is more complex. While associations were curtailed and placed under surveillance, they were not entirely destroyed. In fact, the regime preserved certain associational forms, particularly those connected to education and cultural life, because it also sought to modernize state structures and strengthen its legitimacy. Therefore, I argue that it laid the foundations of 19th-century civil society, which was closely connected with numerous associations, though only the high- and middle-class groups were able to fully take advantage of the legal system in the second half of the 19th century. This legal system, grounded in liberal principles of human rights, sharply contrasted with the neoabsolutist regime that characterized the Habsburg monarchy of the 1850s.[3]

The ambivalence of the coexistence of repression and modernization shaped student associations in Prague. By examining their legal frameworks, activities, and adaptations, this article argues that the 1850s should not be seen as a purely anti-progressive era, but rather one in which civil life survived in restricted yet meaningful ways.

2 "Slovník." In: *Slovník naučný*, vol. 8 (S–Szyttler), eds. František Ladislav Rieger and Jakub Malý, 901. Prague: I. L. Kober, 1870.

3 Kučera, Rudolf. "Občanská společnost: Koncept a Jeho Historizace." *Dějiny – Teorie – Kritika*, 2 (2007), 219–231. https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.2459 (access: September 2025).

THE END OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY REGIME

The revolution of 1848–1849 provided a major impetus for building elements of civil society. After the initial revolutionary successes in the spring of 1848, many associations and clubs were founded. However, while the number of new organizations was high, many were short-lived and remained unofficial in the power vacuum created when state institutions withdrew from control of public space. Lacking an official legal basis, these associations prompted numerous liberal politicians – who often embraced legal formalism – to describe the situation as chaotic and to seek the restoration of order, sometimes even in cooperation with the still-reserved state institutions.[4]

This situation changed with the Pentecostal Storm of June 1848 when fights broke out after repeated provocations from both sides. Some of the student guards tried to fight the Austrian army under the command of General Alfred von Windischgrätz, who did not hesitate to bombard Prague from Prague Castle and burn the Prague mills. However, this radical action led to the isolation of the fighting students. After the mediation of the liberals from the Czech-speaking milieu, they surrendered to the victorious army. This action led to crucial changes in Prague's revolutionary environment, as Windischgrätz declared martial law in the city, bringing an end to the changes begun in March 1848. Most associations, clubs, and media organizations were dissolved or banned, and all activities had to be approved by army officials. The majority of the leaders of the Czech-speaking liberal milieu did not participate in the events. However, Windischgrätz, as a sworn enemy of any kind of revolution, had them imprisoned and permitted their release only after they had been elected to the Constitutional Parliament in Vienna and the government had intervened. Due to martial law, both the

4 On the limited willingness of "liberals" to participate in the revolution, see: Mommsen, Wolfgang J. *1848. Die ungewollte Revolution. Die revolutionären Bewegungen in Europa 1830–1849*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998; Štaif, Jiří. *Obezřetná elita: Česká společnost mezi tradicí a revolucí 1830–1851*. Prague: Dokořán, 2005.

Slavic Congress and Diet of the Bohemian Kingdom had to end early or were never convened. The Bohemian Diet was an essential institution in the eyes of Czech liberal leaders, and many of them thought this was a disaster that helped the revolution to be defeated. František Palacký, in particular, never forgave the radicals.[5]

Martial law ended in July, but public life changed. The revolution became less visible in Prague's streets, and the willingness to take radical revolutionary action declined. The definitive end of the revolutionary environment was marked by the revelation of the May Conspiracy in May 1849. Although the planned uprising never came close to being realized, the state used its mere existence as an opportunity to deal with potentially radical elements that could oppose the regime. Part of this agenda was the dissolution of most of the existing student associations, such as Liberalia, Teutonia, Slavia, Praga, Hilaria, Philadelphia, Marcomania, Vingolf, Fidelia, and Českomoravské bratrstvo. Many student leaders were imprisoned, and participants in the conspiracy were sentenced to long prison terms.[6] This new state of siege lasted until 1853, and the state administration used it to tighten rules for civil society and lay the foundations for a new regime.[7]

This regime, often called "Bach's absolutism" after Alexander Bach, the Minister of the Interior, was a very ambivalent period in the history of the 19th century. Traditional historiography describes this period as a time of increasing state oppression to limit political or national progress. However, contemporary historiography offers a more nuanced view of the decade of the 1850s. The new regime was not able to renounce all of the revolutionary programs; indeed, some of them were even used to its advantage, such as the abolition of *robota* (the obligation of peasants to work for landowners), or university reform, which established a different system of university study and organization, one that approximated Prussian reforms from the beginning of the century and introduced academic self-gover-

5 *Ibid.*, 255–268; Urban, Otto. *Česká společnost 1848–1918*. Prague: Svoboda, 1982, 47–54.

6 Kutnar, František. "Studentstvo v politickém životě doby Bachova absolutismu." *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Historia Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis*, 10/1 (1969), 49–50.

7 On the May Conspiracy and its consequences, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 382–389.

nment, although this remained limited during the 1850s. The new regime also favored economic progress and pursued a liberal economic policy, which was considered to have the potential to restore state power in international relations.[8]

The regime's strong bureaucratic approach, which relied on expanding the bureaucracy to strengthen its rule, could be understood as part of the Europe-wide process that the British historian Christopher Clark called the "European Revolution in Government." According to Clark, most of the European post-revolutionary regimes of the 1850s extended their governance to new fields of everyday life. Although the Habsburg monarchy had a long tradition of bureaucratic governing since the Enlightenment reforms, it also changed its bureaucratic system dramatically under post-revolutionary neoabsolutism, which built a sophisticated structure of the state administration. Establishing this structure cost the regime a large amount of resources, but it became the backbone of the state administration until the collapse of the monarchy.[9]

THE LEGAL CONTEXT

The legal situation during the revolution of 1848–1849 was complicated. The April Constitution confirmed the right to form associations, but the first specific act was published in March 1849 as an imperial patent (No. 171), regulating the exercise of the right of association and assembly. According to this law, every association had to inform the state administration about its founding and provide statutes. The state could forbid the association, but approval was automatic if the state did not react. This act represen-

8 On neoabsolutism, see: Pokorná, Magdaléna. *Jen žádný rámus, pánové!: česká společnost v padesátých letech 19. století*. Prague: Academia, 2024; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 100–139; Judson, Pieter. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, 218–268. On university reforms, see: Aichner, Christof, and Brigitte Mazohl, eds. *Die Thun-Hohenstein'schen Universitätsreformen 1849-1860. Konzeption – Umsetzung – Nachwirkungen*. Wien, Köln, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2017.

9 Clark, Christopher. "After 1848: The European Revolution in Government." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 22 (2012), 171–197. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440112000114 (access: September 2025).

ted a major achievement of liberal attempts to secure freedom of assembly. However, the gradually emerging neoabsolutist state did not respect the act in all its nuances, and several similar acts, such as the Provisional Municipal Act, remained as remnants of the revolution. This remnant was replaced in November 1852 by a new imperial patent (No. 253), officially called the Association Act (*Spolkový zákon*). It restored the pre-revolutionary system, in which an association could exist only if the state administration approved it. The approving authority differed according to the type of association. Besides the police directorate, the student association also had to be approved by the university administration. Despite these restrictions, the act still provided possibilities for existing associations to continue and for new ones to be founded.[10]

The police administration then divided associations into 18 groups with different control regimes and prohibited political associations and activities. Student associations could belong either to the 14th group ("museums and associations for arts and sciences") or the 15th group ("reading and entertainment associations"). Since this article seeks to explore the broader sense of civil society, it primarily deals with the associations from the 15th group, which includes two associations that could be considered "student associations." The historian Eva Drašarová recognized 16 (possibly 15, as the situation of one is not clear in the archive documents) reading associations in the Bohemian Kingdom, most of them located in the city of Prague, and four of them in Pilsen district.[11]

This legal framework confirms that post-revolutionary neoabsolutism preserved certain civil rights, which were intended to support economic growth based on economic liberalism while preventing challenges to the political and social order. In this regard, the regime could even be very

10 Drašarová, Eva. "Soupis právních předpisů a dokumentů ke spolčovacímu právu z fondů Státního ústředního archivu v Praze od poloviny 18. stol. do roku 1918." *Sborník archivních prací*, 40/2 (1990), 298–299.

11 Drašarová, Eva. "Společenský život v Čechách v období neoabsolutismu – spolky padesátých let 19. století." *Paginae historiae: sborník Státního ústředního archivu v Praze*, 0 (1992), 128–169.

supportive, since it considered economic growth a part of the efforts to maintain the existing system.

THE FOUNDING OF STUDENT READING ASSOCIATIONS

A reading association is a kind of organization that has a long history connected to 18th-century learned societies. In the context of the Czech national movement, these associations often provided Czech-written literature that helped foster national consciousness.[12] The role of literature and education in general in building the Czech national consciousness led the Czech historian Jiří Štaif to describe the Czech National Revival with an educational metaphor: the Czech national agitators were trying to educate a Czech-speaking population so the people would awaken and recognize themselves as Czechs.[13] The first reading association in the Bohemian Kingdom was founded in Radnice in 1818, and its library still exists today, though under a different legal status. Because reading associations were initially meant to work in a broad sense, inspiration could also come from bourgeois associations, such as the Měšťanská beseda in Prague, which helped to establish a self-confident Czech bourgeois milieu, and the Juridisch-Politischer Leseverein founded in 1841 in Vienna, which played a crucial role in the spread of liberal thought in broader Viennese circles.[14]

Their history began in the fall of 1848, when many associations were founded in Prague during the renewal of public life after the lifting of martial law. Nevertheless, the situation was complicated for two reasons. Student life was controlled due to the students' engagement in the Pentecostal

12 Vyskočil, Aleš. "Čtenářské spolky." In: *Akademická encyklopedie českých dějin*, vol. 3 (Č/2: česko-pruské vztahy – čtyři pražské artikuly). Prague: Historický ústav AV ČR, 2012, 368–369.

13 Štaif, Jiří. *Modernizace na pokračování. Společnost v českých zemích (1770–1918)*. Prague: Argo, 2020, 95–103.

14 Suchá, Pavla. "Antonín Puchmajer a Česká čtenářská společnost v Radnicích." In: *Jeden jazyk naše heslo buď*. Radnice-Plzeň: Spolek divadelních ochotníků and Studijní a vědecká knihovna Plzeňského kraje, 2001, 109–115; Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 99; Brauneder, Wilhelm. *Leseverein und Rechtskultur. Der Juridisch-politische Leseverein zu Wien 1840–1990*. Wien: Manzsche Verlag- und Universitätbuchhandlung, 1992.

Storm, and students were nationally divided between Czechs and Germans. The national struggle began in April 1848 and slowly developed to shape public life in Prague. It emerged because of different views on the political status of the Czech lands: while the German-speaking milieu preferred to be a part of a united Germany, the Czech-speaking population favored remaining within a reformed Habsburg monarchy. However, many people tried to overcome this struggle with different levels of success, and there was still a large ambivalent or restrained population.[15]

The national conflict was also reflected in the founding of the student associations. The internal records of the Redehalle der deutschen Studenten ("Reading Hall of the German Students") trace the first ideas of establishing this association back to a meeting on September 19, 1848, where German students discussed their relationship with Czech students. Although the national conflict persisted, the German students continued to organize themselves, forming an association that would defend their interests. One member, the law student Hieronymus Roth, publicly suggested establishing a Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten ("Reading and Lecture Hall of the German Students," referred to below as "LDS").[16] The historian Gregor Gatscher-Riedl has interpreted this as an attempt to mock Czech nationalists, since it took place on November 8, 1848 – the anniversary of the Battle of White Mountain from the 17th century, considered to be a disaster in the Czech national narratives.[17] However, I think it was just a coincidence because the very next day, on November 9, 1848, the idea for the Akademický řečnický a čtenářský spolek ("Academic Speaking and Reading Society," referred to below as "AČS") was presented in the great hall of the Carolinum. These actions were not formal acts of founding but rather announcements of preparation. Both associations were

15 The Czech-German national struggle is a part of many synthesizes about the revolution of 1848. See, for example: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 214–268; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 32–38.

16 Russ, Viktor Wilhelm. *Die Lesehalle der deutschen Studenten zu Prag 1848–1862*. Prague: Verlag der Lese und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag, 1873, 6–7.

17 Gatcher-Riedl, Gregor. "Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten in Prag 1848–1938. Erste Formen studentischer Breitenorganisation und Bildungsarbeit." *Einst und Jetzt, Jahrbuch des Vereins für corpsstudentische Geschichtsforschung*, 66 (2021), 151–182.

then officially founded in January 1849, and there were again similarities between them: the LDS was founded on January 6 and AČS on January 9, both in Hôtel de Saxe on Hybernská Street.[18]

Because both associations considered the creation of a library as a crucial part of their activities, they needed significant financial resources. Fundraising was therefore crucial for their functioning. During Christmas 1848, the LDS started a fund-raising campaign to support the association's finances. The biggest donors included the Archbishop of Prague Alois Josef, Freiherr von Schrenk und Nötzig and the outgoing rector of the university, prelate Joseph Zeidler, who contributed 50 and 40 gulden respectively.[19] The association later also gained support from Alois Borrosch, a parliamentary deputy of the Imperial Diet and wealthy Prague factory owner, who sided with German national liberals in the Diet. On the other hand, the AČS was supported by national Czech deputies. Two of them, František Palacký and František Trojan, collected approximately 500 gulden among Czech deputies and another 205 guldens among Czech parliamentary committees, which provided a crucial start-up fund for the new association.[20] The associations' reliance on parliamentary deputies illustrates that, despite the political repression of the late 1840s and 1850s, the liberal political elites supported modernizing projects, including the creation of libraries. Their approach, though the parliament was disbanded in March 1849, also shaped the state administration, which did not abandon all kinds of modernization.

The rivalry between the two associations, the LDS and AČS, is reflected in these patterns of support. The situation was additionally complicated by the national question. Although the LDS was declared to be German, membership was not restricted to a specific nationality. Indeed, its own

18 Russ, *Die Lesehalle*, 8. On the beginning of the AČS, see: Slavík, František Augustin. *Stručný dějepis čtenářského akademického spolku v Praze*. Prague: Nákladem čtenářského akademického spolku, 1869, 3–7.

19 Loebl, Alfred H. *Das Gründungs-Semester der Lese- und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag: 1848–1898*. Prague: Verlag der Lese- und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag, [c. 1898], 9.

20 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 6.

internal records claimed it was open, though several members of its preliminary committee took part in nationalist events during the revolution – most notably the German Congress that took place in November 1848 in Eger, which was one of the main events in opposition to the politics of the Czech-speaking deputies, who supported the AČS. Similarly, František August Slavík, the first historian of the AČS, declared in his *Stručný dějepis čtenářského akademického spolku* that the LDS was founded by German secessionists from AČS, who believed that AČS would be an anti-German and Czech nationalist association. He dismissed this claim as a lie. The internal records of the LDS declared as a reason for its founding a lack of support for German students in Prague and animosity from Czech nationalists, with a specific mention of Pan-Slavism. By contrast, the AČS was officially an anational association, supporting both nationalities equally.[21] Archival records confirm that it used both languages, though more of its internal documents were in Czech, and this only increased over time.[22] At its founding meeting, the association opened with a speech by its new president, Anton Heinrich Springer, a lecturer in art history at the university and a nationally moderate German-speaking intellectual with connections to Prague's moderate elites and a supporter of the federalization of the monarchy. The second speaker was the radical journalist Karel Sabina.[23]

The rivalry between the two associations reflected the growing national divisions among students. Each sought to promote its own cultural and political orientation, which deepened the boundaries between Czechs and Germans. At the same time, both the LDS and AČS still fulfilled the general role of student associations by organizing readings, lectures, and cultural activities that contributed to education and civic life. The national question, therefore, both divided students and stimulated their associational activity, which demonstrates the ambivalent role of nationalism following the initial founding of the associations.

21 *Ibid.*; Loebl, *Das Gründungs-Semester*, 5–7; Gatcher-Riedl, "Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten," 154.

22 AUK (Archiv Univerzity Karlovy), Všestudentský archiv (VSA), Akademický čtenářský spolek (AČS).

23 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 5. Regarding Springer during the revolution, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 383.

Despite their rivalry, there were several attempts to unify the associations or at least promote closer cooperation, proposed mainly by the university authorities. The most significant initiatives took place in 1852, launched by the AČS, and 1859, both resulting in the promise of deeper cooperation between the two associations.[24] These gestures show that, despite significant antagonism, collaboration between the associations remained possible.

THE STATUTES OF THE AČS AND ITS PROBLEMS DURING THE NEOABSOLUTISM ERA

After its founding, the first event held by the AČS was a lecture by its president, Anton Springer, about Goethe's *Faust*.[25] The documents in the archive of AČS also shed light on the complicated evolution of its statutes. The law required all associations to have statutes outlining their structure, leadership, rules for membership, and primary purpose.

The AČS published its first statutes in early 1849, which were clearly affected by the ongoing revolution. The association's stated primary purpose was "*the scientific education of the members in general, and the constitutional and oratorical education in particular.*"[26] Though this might seem rather innocuous, it framed the possible activities of the association and shaped its work. The statutes then listed four specific activities: the possession of journals; the establishment of the library supporting the association's purpose; lectures on the subject of scientific content in general and state subjects in particular; and disputations, speeches, and declamations.[27]

24 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten in Prag: 1848–1938*. [S.l.]: [c. 1978], 9–10; Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 11.

25 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 6.

26 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1849, Stanovy řečnického a čtenářského spolku.

27 *Ibid.*

These points of the statutes were approved at the first general assembly on January 20, 1849. Only one speaker had a critical comment about the declamations, but the clause in question remained in the statutes.[28]

These four activities represent a revolutionary attitude toward public matters, characterized by a vital interest in state policy and its functioning. The revolutionary period was also marked by liberal efforts to promote education in matters regarding politics and law. The *Kapesní slovníček novinářský a konversační* ("Pocket Dictionary for Journalists and Conversationalists"), which aimed to explain new terms appearing during the revolution, described the term "disputation" with examples that significantly attacked the practices and policies of the pre-revolutionary regime. Although the term certainly reflects the old tradition of academic disputation as carried out at universities since the Middle Ages, I consider it important that contemporary actors recognized its rebellious potential.[29]

Even more important was the term "politics," which had special resonance during the revolutionary period because the revolutions stimulated interest in public matters. Another lexicon, *Slownik pro čtenáře nowin, w němž se wyswětlují slowa cizího původu* ("A Dictionary for Readers of the News, in Which Words of Foreign Origin Are Explained"), explained that the term "politics" originated from Ancient Greek knowledge of how to administer municipalities but was now "*more often used as resourcefulness in achieving certain civic goals.*"[30]

The association's rules of procedure also reveal this political interest. They set up regulations for several of the association's activities, such as lectures and the organization of the library. The most important provisions for the purposes of this article dealt with "parliamentary exercises." These

28 However, the use of "declamations" in the statutes is complicated, as the term did not appear in the Czech version nor in later versions of the text. AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápis z 20. ledna 1849.

29 Ritter, Ludvík. *Kapesní slovníček novinářský a konversační.* Prague: Jaroslav Pospíšil, 1850, 209–210.

30 Klácel, František Matouš. *Slownik pro čtenáře nowin, w němž se wyswětlují slowa cizího původu.* Brno: Karel Winiker, 1849, 137.

were meant to be discussions about different topics that included people with opposing views, because "*the chairperson must do as much as possible to ensure that a speaker who speaks in favor of the topic is always followed by someone who speaks against it.*"[31] Although this format seemingly followed the tradition of disputation that was mentioned above, it also reflected a new, keen interest in parliamentary discussion that took place at the beginning of 1849 in Kremsier, where Czech deputies, such as František Ladislav Rieger, became renowned discussants. I understand this as part of a greater fascination with the revolutionary events that shaped contemporary society, which could be understood with the term "revolutionary culture."[32] The spirit in which the AČŠ initially operated clearly illustrates the progressive tendencies within student associations, which in the early post-revolutionary moment could still be tolerated by the regime.

However, the rules of procedure faced a more complicated approval process. At the first general assembly, members decided they were "badly prepared" and postponed the vote. It took place instead on March 24, when most of the paragraphs regarding parliamentary exercises were rejected to simplify the procedures. They were finally adopted in November 1849, but in a very different context: the state of siege following the revelation of the May Conspiracy. During this period, the association had to deal with new challenges. One of them was a new law, which the protocols of the AČS called "Disciplinary Act" (*Disciplinační zákon*). On October 17, the AČS agreed to send a deputy to the new Czech governor, Karl Mecséry, to address the matter.[33]

These statutes became problematic with the revolution's defeat, when the neoabsolutist regime started to secure its position and prevent further

31 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1849, Jednací řád akad. řečnického a čtenářského spolku.

32 On the situation in parliament, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 332–352; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 69–80. On revolutionary culture, see: Katschuba, Wolfgang, and Carolla Lipp. "Revolutionskultur 1848. Einige (volkskundliche) Anmerkungen zu den Erfahrungsräumen und Aktionsformen antifeudaler Volksbewegung in Württemberg." *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte*, 39 (1980), 141–164.

33 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 24. března, 17. října a 16. listopadu 1849.

revolutionary attempts. Limited activities and financial problems led to disputes in the AČS, which culminated in the exclusion of several prominent members: Jan Palacký, son of the leading Czech politician František Palacký, as well as Ludvík Aull, Antonín Zeithammer, and Prince Rudolf Thurn-Taxis. According to Slavík, the president of the AČS explained that "*more such eccentricities were not repeated, and the President's dignity was not insulted,*"[34] although the protocols made no mention of this. Nevertheless, I do not want to omit the possibility that the AČS needed to eliminate exposed personalities. Police reports had already commented on the unreliability of Palacký and Aull.[35] Later, during the 1850s, the AČS faced a decreasing number of members and financial difficulties. Direct pressure against the association led to restrictions on its activities: only individual study in the library was allowed, and the state administration monitored the collection to prevent access to radicalizing books. In 1853, the Police Directorate banned a book entitled *The Importance of the Present Age*, published in 1848, which almost certainly emphasized the importance of the revolution.[36] That same year (but not dated), the AČS sent a list of books for state review. In 1857, approximately 30 books were removed from the library. Though direct state intervention is not mentioned, most of the removed books were published in 1848 and did not need to be approved by state censorship at the time of publication. The majority were also related to the topic of religious freedom and interconfessional dialogue, themes that the government did not support after the sanction of the Austrian Concordat in 1855.[37]

These pressures led to the necessity of a change of statutes after the new Association Act of 1853. The documents in the archive of the AČS offer only a limited view into the discussions about this change. However, they do show that on 31 January 1853, the committee discussed the possibility of dividing the association into three sections – Law, Philosophy, and Mathematics-Science – but these plans were never incorporated into the

34 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 10.

35 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 27. února 1852; Kutnar, "Studentstvo," 50.

36 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton 3, Archiv, Part II, 1853, "Die Bedeutung des gegenwartigen Zeitalters."

37 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1858.

statutes. This proposal was signed by a new librarian of the AČS, Julius Grégr, then a law student and later an influential politician and the leader of the Young-Czech Party.[38] The preparation of the new statutes took a long time: on January 5, the committee decided to present them to the general assembly and tasked the new association secretary, Josef Vaněk, to make corrections.[39] The records for much of the year are missing, but on October 10, the state administration finally corrected them so the general assembly could approve them during October 1853 (the exact date is not recorded). At this meeting, their author Vaněk was elected president.[40]

The new statutes changed the association's primary purpose to "*encouraging and fostering scientific endeavors, especially for the individual education of its members.*"[41] These new statutes left out the term "constitutional," which was strongly associated with the revolution, and also omitted a clause promoting "oratorical education," which confirmed that the association could not organize debates. Therefore, the AČS also attained different means to achieve this new purpose, namely: "*the reading of (1) public journals of scientific or any useful content and (2) appropriate works in various branches of literature.*"[42] The statutes did not mention lectures and discussions, effectively reducing the association's activities to individual study in libraries. The AČS also needed to stay trouble-free in the eyes of the state administration, because in early 1853 it petitioned the Prague Governorship to be allowed to continue its work, and a negative response would have meant its dissolution. These changes watered down the association's mission, but their approval also shows that the regime preferred to limit rather than abolish such associations.

38 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1853, Programm základních pravidel sborů jednotlivých; AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 31. ledna 1853.

39 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 5. ledna 1853.

40 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 10. října 1853; and the next protocol from 1853.

41 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1853, Statuten des akademischen Lesevereins in Prag.

42 *Ibid.*

To strengthen its standing, the AČS decided to join a fundraising campaign by the academic gymnasium named after Franz Josef Stiftung, which was established after an unsuccessful attempt on the emperor's life on 18 February 1853. Similarly, the AČS donated 200 gulden to a new state loan on 21 July 1854. I argue that these gestures were intended to demonstrate loyalty, since these campaigns were recognized as an expression of devotion to the emperor. Such acts reveal how associations adapted to survive: the regime tolerated them as long as they aligned with official displays of loyalty.[43]

In this context, a decision of the committee on November 19 appears striking: they decided to buy busts of "excellent men" (*výtečných můžů*), which mostly referred to a group of nationalist politicians. Though it is not specified whose busts were bought, I expect they were all people who were not considered problematic by the state administration, although this could also be a sign of the association's self-confidence.[44] The purchase of these busts can be understood as a double-edged gesture, both a cautious assertion of cultural pride and a demonstration that the association remained within acceptable limits.

In this way, the association's role was simultaneously curtailed and sustained: its original political ambitions were diluted, but its existence as an educational and cultural body preserved. This duality exemplifies how the regime combined repression with modernization.

LESE- UND REDEHALLE DER DEUTSCHEN STUDENTEN IN THE PERIOD OF NEOABSOLUTISM

The LDS faced similar issues during the 1850s because of state politics toward the student associations. Shortly after its foundation, on February

43 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 5. března, 21. července 1854. For reflections on the assassination attempt, see: Pokorná, *Jen žádný rámus*, 186–198.

44 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 19. listopadu 1853.

14, 1849, the first lecture took place on "Antique and modern art." The association also engaged with very topical and controversial issues in its weekly lectures. One lecture, "Does the state of siege put an end to freedom of the press?" (*Hört mit dem Belagerungszustand die Presse-Freiheit auf?*), reacted to the situation of several cities in the monarchy that had been put in a state of siege during the last year (most importantly Prague in summer and Vienna after the October Revolution 1848), and discussed the issue of press freedom, one of the most significant achievements of the revolution. Another lecture, "Does a state have the right to intervene in a neighboring state if a revolution has broken out there?" (*Hat ein Staat das Recht der Intervention im Nachbarstaat, falls dort die Revolution ausgebrochen ist?*), reflected the European dimension of the revolution and the legacy of the Holy Alliance. In contrast, a lecture entitled "Is the emancipation of the Jews in Austria's interest?" (*Liegt die Emanzipation der Juden im Interesse Österreichs?*) discussed a topic strictly related to the Habsburg monarchy, and can be seen as a precursor of the antisemitism of the late 19th century. However, the content of the lecture was not preserved. The lectures lasted until the planned pause on May 1 (the beginning of Easter holidays) but were never resumed because of the start of a state of siege in May 1849.[45]

On 7 January 1849, the LDS was acknowledged as an official student association by Prague University. This formed a strong connection between the university and the association, and university authorities even acted as its protectors.[46] In the context of the new reform of university study that established greater self-government, this recognition represented an important success, even if the neoabsolutist regime did not always respect its own regulations. This official recognition highlights how student associations could be both feared and integrated. They were controlled from above, and at the same time drawn into the processes of modernization.

45 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 5; Pokorná, Magdaléna. "Svoboda tisku: Interpretace pojmu v diskursu let 1848–1851." In: *Symboly doby: historické eseje*, eds. Milan Hlavačka and Jakub Raška, 191–209. Prague: Historický ústav, 2019; Pokorná, Magdaléna. "Cenzura: Interpretace pojmu v diskursu let 1848–1851." In: *Symboly doby: historické eseje*, eds. Milan Hlavačka and Jakub Raška, 211–220. Prague: Historický ústav, 2019.

46 Gatcher-Riedl, "Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten," 155.

The LDS also faced complications with its statutes. The original version defined the association's purpose as the "*promotion of scientific education without political ulterior motives and national arrogance.*"[47] In 1853, the LDS was required to change its statutes to comply with the new law, though the details are not preserved. That same year, the association sent an address to Emperor Franz Josef I, wishing him a speedy recovery after an assassination attempt. The state administration also controlled the LDS library: in 1856, the authorities removed "The Evangelium of Freedom" from the library, likely because it was perceived as opposing the privileged position of the Catholic Church after the 1855 Concordat.[48] Similar to the AČS, the fate of the LDS was complex. Its statutes were revised, its library censored, and its activities curtailed, yet it was not dissolved. Instead, it persisted as part of the university's intellectual life, tolerated – and in some ways even supported – as long as it remained within the regime's carefully drawn boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The period of neoabsolutism was a challenging time for civil society and associations, especially those connected to students who had a revolutionary reputation in the eyes of the new establishment. The associations were controlled, there was always a representative of the state administration at official meetings, and their activities were limited to individual study. In 1852, the AČS wanted to publish its own journal, but that was never realized. Similarly, in 1853, the LDS could not publish an annual anthology to celebrate its fifth anniversary.[49] This control is perhaps most clearly visible in the dramatic decline in membership: in the case of the AČS from 500 members in 1849 to 69 in 1851, although it again reached 500 members in 1863.[50] The LDS experienced a decrease from 371 members in 1849 to 187 in 1852 and then to 104 members in 1855. As a result of this, the associations

47 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 6.

48 AUK, VSA, Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten, nro. 1363, "Evangelium der Freiheit."

49 Slavík, František August. *Dějiny českého studentstva.* Prague: F.A. Slavík, 1874, 91.

50 *Ibid.*, 91.

also lacked financial means because they could not collect enough membership fees.[51]

At the same time, the regime did not choose to abolish student associations entirely. Fearful of their revolutionary potential, it sought to contain them, but the modernizing dimension of neoabsolutism also valued certain forms of education and associational activity. The duality of the 1850s with regard to student associations can be seen in fundraising campaigns, the complex role of nationalism, and certain reforms pursued by the state administration. Perhaps most strikingly, the university reforms of the 1850s allowed elements of academic self-government, and associations were tolerated in reduced form because they could be made to serve broader state goals. This contradiction points to the article's central argument: neoabsolutism combined repression with modernization, producing an ambivalent form of progress in which civic life persisted within closely defined limits.

In addition to the complicated nature of the regime, it is also worth noting that many historians have overlooked the fact that it evolved, so that by the end of the decade the situation slowly began to change. In 1857, the state administration allowed the AČS to organize a benefit concert for its activities, and its approved program contained "national songs." On 2 December 1858, the general assembly decided to make František Palacký an honorary member, and the senate of the university became a protector of the association. In March 1859, a committee decided to buy missing volumes of Palacký's *Geschichte von Böhmen* (published in Czech as *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě*).[52] Though a preserved program did not reveal specific songs, this contrasts with the revolutionary period, when songs often carried overt political symbolism.

The changing atmosphere was symbolized by the celebrations that were permitted in 1859 for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Fridrich Schiller,

51 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 6, 10.

52 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 2. prosince 1858 a 24. března 1859; AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1857.

several of whose texts inspired the emancipation and progress of civic society. As Schiller was regarded as a German symbol with a very nationalistic meaning, he became problematic for Czech nationalist students, who on 10 November spontaneously interrupted a parade by shouting the names of famous figures of Czech history, such as Jan Žižka, Emperor Charles IV, and František Palacký, and singing national songs, such as "Kde domov můj" or "Hej Slované." This interruption led to an extensive investigation, during which investigators reported the supposed existence of a secret student association called Czechia. Although there was precedence for such a secret society from the early 1850s in the Brotherhood of Red Flag, Czechia did not exist and was merely an invention of a paranoid state administration.[53] These developments indicate that by the end of the 1850s, the most repressive features of the regime were beginning to recede.

53 Kutnar, "Studentstvo," 90. On using national songs during demonstrations, see: Agnew, Hugh. "They're Singing Our Song." *Historica*, 65/1 (2024), 98–121. https://doi.org/10.5507/ho.2024.007 (access: September 2025).

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POVZETEK

Članek preučuje usodo študentskih bralnih društev v habsburški monarhiji v obdobju postrevolucionarnega neoabsolutizma v petdesetih letih 19. stoletja. To je bil čas, ko je avstrijska država po revoluciji leta 1848 odpravila številne državljanske svoboščine, hkrati pa je ohranila in selektivno podpirala določene oblike društvenega povezovanja, da bi lahko spodbujala gospodarsko modernizacijo in ohranjala politični nadzor.

To tematiko članek raziskuje na primeru dveh praških študentskih društev: *Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten* (LDS) in *Akademický čtenářský spolek* (AČS). Obe društvi sta razvili različne strategije preživetja pod nadzorom neoabsolutističnega režima. LDS, ki je izhajal iz nemško govorečega študentskega okolja, je poudarjal znanstveno izobraževanje in povezave z univerzitetnimi oblastmi, kar mu je v določeni meri zagotavljalo institucionalno zaščito. AČS, ki je bil tesneje povezan s češkimi liberalnimi krogi, pa je že od začetka združeval ambicije političnega samoizobraževanja, razprav in razvoja knjižnic. Razkol med študenti glede narodnih vprašanj je poglabljal rivalstvo med društvoma, saj je LDS zagovarjal nemški kulturni prostor, medtem ko je AČS postopoma postal pomemben forum za češko kulturno in intelektualno usmeritev. Prav tako pa je pri obeh društvih mogoče slediti podobni poti: od revolucionarne pobude in široko zastavljenih ciljev k previdnejšemu, depolitiziranemu delovanju, ki se je osredotočalo predvsem na knjižničarsko dejavnost in skrbno nadzorovane kulturne aktivnosti. Kljub represiji pa so imela ta društva pomembno vlogo pri ohranjanju kulturnega in izobraževalnega življenja ter pri subtilni krepitvi državljanske identitete.

Neoabsolutizem v Avstriji članek prikazuje kot kompleksno ureditev, ki je združevala avtoritarni nadzor z modernizacijo in omogočala določeno mero državljanskega udejstvovanja v strogo določenih okvirih. Ta dvojnost je v nasprotju s tradicionalno historiografsko predstavo o petdesetih letih 19. stoletja kot izključno zatiralskem desetletju in izpostavi študentska društva hkrati kot žrtve in kot akterje v novem političnem kontekstu.

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Technocracy, or: The Fluctuation of Western Imaginaries of Progress in the 20th Century[1]

Tehnokracija, ali: spreminjanje zahodnih imaginarijev napredka v 20. stoletju

Sarah Lias Ceide

1 This article is based on research conducted between 2022 and 2024 at the German Historical Institute in Rome for the project "Systemrelevante Technokraten in Italien ab den 1990er Jahren."

ABSTRACT

This article offers a conceptual history of the inflationary term "technocracy" throughout the 20th century, showing that its rise in usage stemmed largely from its capacity to articulate fundamental critiques of the perceived excesses of progress. Whether referring to anxieties about "technization" or to statist ambitions in terms of economic policymaking, denunciations of technocracy linked to ideas of progress were numerous and evolved over the century, depending on who employed the concept – and, crucially, when. Drawing on examples from the United States, Germany, and Italy, the article demonstrates how the conceptual history of technocracy reflects the ongoing fluctuation of Western imaginaries of progress and discourses of modernity.

Keywords

technocracy, conceptual history, narratives of progress, modernity

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje pojmovno zgodovino politično obarvanega izraza »tehnokracija« skozi 20. stoletje in skuša pokazati, da porast njegove rabe v veliki meri izhaja iz zmožnosti, da izrazi kritiko ekscesov napredka. Ne glede na to, ali se je izraz nanašal na tesnobo pred »tehnizacijo« ali na državne ambicije na področju gospodarskega načrtovanja, so bile obsodbe tehnokracije, povezane z idejami napredka, številne in so se skozi čas spreminjale glede na to, kdo je pojem uporabljal in, kar je ključno, kdaj. Na primerih Združenih držav, Nemčije in Italije članek pokaže, kako pojmovna zgodovina tehnokracije odraža stalno spreminjanje zahodnih imaginarijev napredka in diskurzov modernosti.

Ključne besede

tehnokracija, pojmovna zgodovina, naracije napredka, modernost

INTRODUCTION: THE MANY FACES OF "TECHNOCRACY"

Stemming from the combination of the old Greek terms *téchne* (τέχνη) and *kratos* (κράτος), translatable as "rule of the knowing," today "technocracy" is an inflationary, highly politicized, and mostly negatively connotated term. This becomes obvious when considering the widely differing contexts in which it is being used and, moreover, who exactly is using it. In the public sphere as well as within average colloquial usage, the most common intended effect when referring to technocracy seems to be criticism of society's over-technicization. In 2015, Pope Francis quite emblematically referred to a "technocratic paradigm" when warning Catholics about the dangers of everyday "*technology* [that] *tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic.*"[2] At the same time, in the context of Western political discourse and especially in that of right-wing populist parties or movements, technocracy has long been seen as an enemy force, and appears to represent a specific form of elite criticism, born out of the crisis of both the traditional party system and global economies.[3] As an example, one might take Marine Le Pen's various remarks denouncing the technocracy of the Macron government with regard to its lack of adaptability in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Strikingly similar rhetoric was used by the national-conservative wing of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in 2015 in the so-called Erfurt Resolution, a document which aimed, among other things, at preventing the party from degenerating into technocracy and thus becoming too similar to its political opponents.[5] Finally, both within

2 Pope Francis. "Encyclical Letter Laudato SI` of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home." 24 May 2015. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (access: May 2025).

3 Anti-technocratic positions are not exclusive to the right-wing spectrum of populist parties. In Italy, for instance, Peppe Grillo's left-wing party Movimento Cinque Stelle has always been a vocal critic of the country's supposed technocratization.

4 On this topic, see: Herman, Lise Esther, and Marta Lorimer. "Dancing with the Devil? Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen and the Articulation of a New Political Divide in France." *Nations and Nationalism*, 30/3 (2024), 425–440. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nana.13001 (access: June 2025).

5 Grieß, Thielko. "Flügelkämpfe bei der Afd. 'Das Projekt ist in Gefahr': Björn Höcke im Gespräch." *Deutschlandfunk*, 24 March 2015. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fluegelkaempfe-bei-der-afd--das-projekt-ist-in-gefahr-100.html (access: June 2025).

public and political discourse, it can be observed that the denunciation of technocratic tendencies clearly feeds into fears of the erosion of democratic structures. This is usually the case with discourses that frame the former as being directly threatened by the absolutist aspirations of so-called "technocrats."[6] Through their depiction as stone-cold strategists, a financial elite pulling the strings of national and international politics, these technocrats are often at the core of present-day adaptations of traditional conspiracy narratives.[7]

While the term or concept of technocracy has long found its place within everyday language and imaginaries as well as within political discourse, it is no stranger to academic research, either. In fact, literature on the subject, especially in the field of social and political science, has multiplied exponentially since the turn of the century. This is mainly thanks to a quite peculiar phenomenon that started in the late 1990s: the political materialization of technocracy. Most of the related scholarly literature is concerned with the phenomenon of Europe's so-called "technocratic governments," which have become a familiar sight on the continent's political stage over the last 30 years.[8] Interestingly, here some of the above-presented imaginaries and narratives relating to technocracy resurface, for instance when

6 This especially concerns the present-day automatism in the association between technocracy and state-led economic policymaking tied to crises or transformations of the state, as is the case with the recent phenomenon of so-called "technocratic governments."

7 Popular discourses in particular tend to create direct associations between the term technocracy and looming dictatorship, or at least, anti-democratic tendencies. This trend seemed to worsen during the COVID-19 pandemic. On this, see: Oana, Ioana-Elena, and Abel Bojar. "Populism, Anti-Technocratic Attitudes, and COVID-19 Related Conspiracy Beliefs across Europe." *Comparative European Politics*, 21/4 (2023), 515–534.

8 The focus of these texts has ranged from prosopographical analyses of technocrats to comparisons of technocratic cabinets' policymaking with that of their predecessors. See, among others: Improta, Marco. "Inside Technocracy: Features and Trajectories of Technocratic Ministers in Italy (1948–2021)." *Italian Political Science*, 16/3 (2021), 220–240; Bertsou, Eri, and Daniele Caramani, eds. *The Technocratic Challenge to Democracy*. London: Routledge, 2020, 113–130.

political scientists *tout court* theorize the existence of a technocratic elite or technocrats in Western societies.[9]

But why has technocracy become a buzzword that mirrors increasingly polarized positions and political cultures, and, more importantly, when did this term gain prominence? These questions stand at the center of this article. It argues that the surge in the use of the term technocracy has happened mainly due to the concept's seemingly innate criticism of what may be perceived as excessive progress. Rarely defined, contextualized, or historicized, the popularity of the term technocracy seems to lie in its ability to express criticism of different imaginaries of progress, whether it be of rapid technological expansion, the scientization of politics, or the fear of a possible erosion of Western values and democracy through political changes. Building on this basic assumption, the article goes on to argue that neither the conceptual ambiguity nor the inflationary use of technocracy in relation to the notion of progress are to be considered a novelty of the 21st century, much less exclusive to it. In considering the concept of technocracy as crucial to discourses of modernity, the article treats it as a conceptual mirror of the idea of progress throughout the 20th century.[10] Building on the hypothesis that the former constantly mirrors and reflects the changes the latter underwent over time, the article focuses on the varying meanings of technocracy, as well as on its instrumentalization by certain individuals or groups over the course of the past century, revealing the fluidity or fluctuation of imaginaries of progress in Western societies. Through the analysis of sources and examples from the US, Germany, and Italy between the interwar period and the end of the Cold War, the article will show that, on a transatlantic level, the term technocracy came to signify the desire for

9 For example, see: Cozzolino, Adriano, and Diego Giannone. "Technocrats in (the Crises of) the State. Political Change and State Transformations in Italy." *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 7/1 (2021), 5–34. On the ever-present issue of how to define technocrats, technocracy, and technocratic governments, see: McDonnell, Duncan, and Marco Valbruzzi. "Defining and Classifying Technocrat-Led and Technocratic Governments." *European Journal of Political Research*, 53/4 (2014), 654–671.

10 For the historiographical tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* and its use in the reconstruction of historical temporalities, see: Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

progress at one moment and its excesses or even the opposite – regress – in the next, depending on who invoked the term and when.

AUTOCRATIC SYMPATHIES AND THE FUSION OF MAN AND MACHINE: TECHNOCRACY DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

As has been established earlier, today two of the most common interpretations and intended usages of the term technocracy, as well as of its personification, technocrats, refer to a supposed excess of progress and its looming, potentially devastating effects. Firstly, the radically progressive, future-oriented management of resources and policymaking through technological solutions or by non-political experts, often in the economic and financial fields; and secondly – the consequence of this very technicization or "rule of the knowing" – the oncoming of totalitarianism and despotism. As stated above, neither of these two consequential conceptions should be seen as a novelty. In fact, both are rooted within perceptions of modernity and progress that were born out of the crisis-ridden early 1930s, when the term technocracy first gained global attention among the public.

Even though it had been known in intellectual and academic circles since the 1920s,[11] the term technocracy made its way into international headlines in 1930, thanks to Virginia-born engineer Howard Scott. On the back of the devastating financial crisis that started in 1929, Scott had founded Technocracy Incorporated, often referred to as Technocracy Inc., a group of like-minded engineers who understood themselves to be part of a revolutionary movement rather than just a group of socially active specialists. At the core of the organization stood the objective of bringing to life the so-called "technate," a utopian model of society based on the

11 While the term technocracy was first introduced by William H. Smith in 1919, it would really attract the public's attention two years later, when the US sociologist Thorstein Bunde Veblen published his theory of "economic collectivism." Here, technocracy was defined as the "reign of engineers" and clearly influenced by socialist ideals. See: Veblen, Thorstein. *The Engineers and the Price System*. New York: W.B. Huebsch, 1921.

conviction that capitalism had ultimately failed.[12] According to Scott and his fellow technocrats, the capitalist model should therefore be substituted by the supranational system of the technate, a superstate in which the old political elite, seen as incapable and unable to salvage the US and the industrialized West as a whole, would be marginalized or even ousted from political and economic decision-making in favor of "the knowing" – namely experts, and first and foremost engineers.[13]

While the scientific value of Scott's complex and often convoluted theories would be widely criticized and eventually lead to the engineer's downfall,[14] their impact on the conceptual evolution of technocracy for decades to come cannot be underestimated. In fact, when they first reached major news outlets, amidst the economic crisis and the generally bleak social and economic terms, Technocracy Inc.'s objectives spread rapidly, first across the US, then around the globe, with the "technocracy frenzy" reaching its peak by 1933. In January of that year, the German newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* stated that the debates surrounding technocracy "*presently consume more ink than all of the other trending topics in the field of economics put together.*"[15] This did not mean, however, that Scott's theories were universally accepted or seen benevolently. In Italy, for example, the prestigious newspaper *Corriere della Sera* voiced some cynical criticism,

12 The group would put great emphasis on outreach work, publishing multiple texts which aimed at explaining their theories to the broader public. See, among others: Scott, Howard. *Introduction to Technocracy*. New York: Technocracy Inc., 1933; Weishaar, Wayne. "Technocracy: An Appraisal." *The North American Review*, 235/2 (1933), 121–128. On Technocracy Inc. and its legacy, see: Willeke, Stefan. *Die Technokratiebewegung in Nordamerika und Deutschland zwischen den Weltkriegen: Eine vergleichende Analyse*. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 1995.

13 Technocracy Inc. "What is Technocracy?" *The Technocrat*, 3/4 (1937), 3–5.

14 As early as the spring of 1933, at the very height of his popularity, Scott and his theories had come under intense scrutiny in the US, being heavily criticized both by scientists and politicians. Among other things, Scott was accused of having faked his academic degree, as well as fabricated empirical data. From there on, the engineer's downfall only accelerated, and he was quickly ousted from academic circles, with Technocracy Inc. consequentially losing its promising momentum. See: "Technocracy Cult Now Is on the Wane; Break Between Columbia and Howard Scott Brought the Movement to a Climax." *The New York Times*, 29 January 1933. On Scott and Technocracy Inc. after 1933, see: Johnston, Sean F. "Technological Parables and Iconic Illustrations: American Technocracy and the Rhetoric of the Technological Fix." *History and Technology*, 2/4 (2017), 196–219.

15 "Maschinenkraft als Wertmesser. Kritik der Technokratie." *Kölnische Zeitung*, 26 January 1933.

attributing Technocracy Inc.'s success mainly to an "*American obsession* [...] *with pseudo-science*": "*No one really understood Scott's line of thought, yet everyone was eager to lay it out to other people.*"[16] Still, only a few articles heavily criticized or questioned the American engineer, even when highlighting the underlying implication of autocratic rule within the technate. On the contrary, overall this aspect seemed to garner more approval than outrage, echoing a general trend of "autocratic sympathy" during the interwar period.[17] The German *Industrie- und Handelsblatt der Dortmunder Zeitung*, for instance, praised the US technocrats for their scientific conviction. But most importantly, in calling for an implementation of the technate in the near future, the newspaper dismissed all criticism of a potential totalitarian regime led by engineers, stating that Technocracy Inc.'s striving for social and economic reform would indeed justify a restriction of individual rights: "*the French Revolution is not the only era in history in which crimes have been committed in the name of freedom.*"[18]

This first phase of international circulation of the concept of technocracy is highly revealing with regard to its future interpretations and usages. Besides the lingering accusation of totalitarianism, the debate surrounding Howard Scott's technocracy gave birth to two further central aspects – the red thread, one could say – at the heart of the term's conceptual history for a century to come. In both cases, the intertwining of technocracy and progress is crucial. On the one hand, by putting production – meaning the mechanical forging of material goods and machines required to produce them – at the center of the technate model, Scott and his associates supported the idea of "*man adapting to the machine, and not the machine to man.*"[19] In the arena of public opinion, this fed into well-established dystopian imaginaries of progress, such as the "man-machine-dilemma," meaning the fear of unstoppable technological progress soon leading to

16 "Il fallimento della 'tecnocrazia'." *Corriere della Sera*, 27 January 1933.

17 On the centrifugal social and political forces at play in post-war Europe, see: Leonhard, Jörn. *Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923.* München: C.H. Beck, 2018.

18 Low, U.M. "Probleme um die Technokratie." *Industrie- und Handelsblatt der Dortmunder Zeitung*, 25 February 1933.

19 "Kennen Sie Technokratie?" *Abendausgabe der Neuen Mannheimer Zeitung*, 24 February 1933.

manpower being subjugated to and substituted by machines. This, on the one hand, eventually resulted in the spread of a conceptual association between the notion of technocracy and a new, potentially dangerous concept of the post-industrial process of teleological progress. On the other hand, the debate set the precedent of understanding technocracy as anti-politics. By pushing for the rise of the engineers, as the *Neue Mannheimer Zeitung* put it in 1933, Scott seemed intent on forcing economic and societal progress through the "*rule of technicians, of scientists over a world that has been led to the brink of collapse by politicians.*"[20] This opened up a discourse in which technocracy was not only praised or criticized as yet another post-crisis solution to the economic and social problems of the present, but also came to embody the growing loss of faith in traditional politics and the corresponding turn toward non-political experts.

While Scott's theories sparked lively debates everywhere in Europe, their influence was particularly felt in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, two regimes aiming to place themselves at the peak of technological and societal progress, with the self-declared revolutionary objective of forging new men and empires.[21] In the context of the Fascist and National Socialist discourses of modernity, one can observe a complex process of conceptual appropriation with regard to technocracy. This process involved distancing the regimes' own perceptions of technocracy and progress from external ones, like those associated with Howard Scott and Technocracy Inc., or with Soviet socialism. Especially in the German case, but partially also in the Italian one, Scott's idea of the rule of experts completely opposed the so-called *Führerprinzip*, the absolute and irrefutable centrality of the Führer in all political and military decision-making. In fact, when asked by the American press about his own opinion of Technocracy Inc. in 1933, Benito Mussolini clearly distanced himself from the US technocrats,

20 *Ibid.*

21 On Italian Fascism and National Socialism and their imaginaries of modernity, see: Welzer, Harald, ed. *Nationalsozialismus und Moderne.* Tübingen: Ed. Diskord, 1993; Esposito, Fernando. *Mythische Moderne: Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien.* München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011.

condemning their theories as "*too materialistic*."[22] At the same time, both regimes recognized the necessity of separating their imaginaries of technocracy and progress from those propagated by the Soviet state, seen as backward and anti-progressive. Indeed, once the notion of technocracy started to spread globally, a strong public association between the technate model and totalitarianism was established, a process that heavily implied an innate affinity between technocracy and Soviet socialism. Of course, this conceptual entanglement was one both Fascism and National Socialism were keen to avoid when forging their own interpretations of technocracy. This effort of both terminological appropriation and distancing was reflected in the press. In Germany, shortly after Hitler's rise to power, the *Dortmunder Zeitung* stated that "*Socialists have always tried to stand in the way of technological progress*," while "*Technocracy wants to complete the victory of the machine*."[23] In a similar fashion, the Italian *Corriere della Sera* stressed that technocracy "*has nothing to do with the moral or political impulses that define the bolshevist model*."[24]

Technocracy was temporarily stripped of its negative, presumably anti-human and anti-political connotations and adapted to the regimes' ideological framework. The notion ended up aptly capturing the idea of radical and violent progress propagated by both Fascism and National Socialism. The Fascist example shows clearly how the regime was able to develop its very own understanding of technocracy, one that ultimately took the word's menacing conceptual implications – both the man-machine-dilemma and the politician-expert-dichotomy – and completely reversed them. This is emblematically demonstrated in an article published in 1940 by the staunch Fascist Cornelio di Marzio in *Corriere della Sera*. Here, di Marzio presented technocracy as naturally encapsulated within the essence of Fascism itself. To the author, Fascist ideology called for the machine to serve the regime's will, with it therefore being always subordinate to men – a fun-

22 "Mussolini Sees Master Mind Needed Here; Bars Technocratic Rule as Too Materialistic." *The New York Times*, 11 January 1933.

23 Low, "Probleme um die Technokratie."

24 De' Stefani, Alberto. "Tecnocrazia." *Corriere della Sera*, 12 January 1933.

damental subversion of Howard Scott's technocracy.[25] At the same time, di Marzio also subverted the dichotomy between politics, which he viewed as representing human sentiment, and expertise, or technology-oriented rationality, by stating: "*We cannot allow there to be conflict between our sentiments and our rationality. Technology has to completely dominate raw nature, but, at the same time, it has to be at our service, not at the service of some abstract and surreal concept of progress but rather of our precise political imperialism.*"[26]

The end of World War II marked not only the downfall of the Nazi and Fascist empires, but also that of their very own and peculiar interpretations of technocracy. In the context of mounting international tensions between East and West within the new, post-war world order, and with Howard Scott's grip on the term having long faded, technocracy would morph more and more into a concept with extremely negative connotations. Indeed, it became increasingly associated with totalitarianism, in the form of the West's old and new enemies: Nazi Germany, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its allies, on the other. At the same time, the concept of technocracy also resurfaced as the by now well-established men-machine dilemma – an expression of society's fear of excessive progress on the back of rapid and astounding scientific and technological innovations – and was increasingly applied to the political arena.

ANTICOMMUNISM, "THE MACHINE THAT THINKS," AND PLANNING PARADIGMS: TECHNOCRACY DURING THE COLD WAR

When philosopher Herbert Marcuse referred to Nazi Germany in the early 1940s as "*the German version of technocracy*" in which "*morale fades into technology*," he set a precedent in the association among totalitarianism, moral degeneration, and technocracy that was only destined to grow

25 Di Marzio, Cornelio. "Tecnica e politica." *Corriere della Sera*, 16 April 1940.

26 *Ibid.*

stronger after 1945.[27] In the first decades after the war, this association was extended to include – or rather returned to including once again – Soviet socialism and communism, establishing technocracy as a dividing criterion between a supposed progressive West and a regressive or backward East. In 1953, the Italian press emblematically described "Stalin's new man" as an "*executioner of orders, a cold and non-conscious instrument of Soviet technocracy.*"[28] This strong anticommunist interpretation of technocracy quite often and notably merged with the resurfaced man-machine-dilemma. In this regard, another example from Italy is quite telling. In an article published in *Corriere della Sera* in 1950 under the title "The Machine that Thinks," the reader was first informed of the newest invention, a highly efficient calculator or computer, then immediately warned of the coming of the "reign of the machines," meaning the age of technocracy.[29] The latter, the author ominously predicted, would forge citizens similar to "Stalin's new man" described above: thanks to "*machine*[s] *that think*," "*Technocracy will produce a collective individual, standardized* [...] *without any sense of criticism or the ability to make distinctions.*"[30] Similar processes of conceptual association could be observed in West Germany. During the 78th Catholic convention in Berlin in 1958, attendants were first instructed on the menace of socialist ideas and propaganda, and then immediately warned of technocracy, here meaning excessive technological progress threatening all of humanity.[31]

However, the fear of technocracy as an excess of progress was not exclusively associated with totalitarian regimes or machines. During the Cold War, certain scientific breakthroughs also contributed to this particular conceptual entanglement. This was especially true with respect to nuclear physics and nuclearization in a broader sense. On this matter, in

27 Marcuse, Herbert. *Schriften aus dem Nachlass: Feindanalysen. Über die Deutschen.* Ed. Peter-Erwin Jansen. Springe: Zu Klampen, 2007.

28 Vegas, Ferdinando. "Vita e morte di Stalin." *La Stampa*, 17 February 1953.

29 Bertagnoni, Alfredo. "La macchina che pensa. Meraviglia dell'avvenire." *Corriere della Sera*, 13 November 1950.

30 *Ibid.*

31 "Unsere Sorge der Mensch, unser Heil der Herr." *Honnefer Volkszeitung*, 16 August 1958.

1954 the famous publicist Robert Jungk stated that in both Europe and the US people had lost their faith in the "good scientist," who was now seen as part of a new, shadowy, and destructive technocratic elite.[32] In fact, in the US, as early as 1946, *The New York Times* had foreseen the dawn of a new technocracy on the back of the 1945 nuclear attacks on Japan.[33] Similar views were also expressed throughout the 1950s in the West-German and Italian press in the context of progressive nuclearization.[34] This led to a new, concrete personification of the concept for the first time since Scott's technocrats of the 1930s. During the Cold War, the term technocrat rose to unprecedented popularity, as it came to describe a member of different post-war elites born out of what was perceived as the dizzying scientific, societal, and political progress of the post-war economic boom. Far from including only nuclear scientists, the term technocrat also ended up being extended to include decision-makers within newly founded supranational institutions, such as those of NATO or of the European Economic Community (EEC). As the German historian Dirk van Laak has stressed, these organizations "*were from the very start suspected of being agencies of technocracy,*" and were perceived as "*strongholds of soulless practical constraints.*"[35] Seemingly in confirmation of this assessment, in 1953 the Italian journalist Beniamino De Ritis had already defined the different, recently created economic, philanthropic, and political unions of the post-war era as "*distant ghosts*" and "*secret spaces of contemporary technocracy.*"[36]

The revival of the use of the term technocracy as a criticism of excessive progress, or the lack thereof, as well as its personification, the technocrat, led to the proliferation of the term's usage in the public, political, and aca-

32 Jungk, Robert. "Europe and American technocracy." In: Vero Roberti, "L'Europa teme l'avvento del tetro regno dei 'robots'." *Corriere della Sera*, 8 April 1954.

33 "Atom Seen Causing New 'Technocracy'." *The New York Times*, 7 January 1946.

34 See, for instance: Sacchi, Filippo. "Tutti uguali di fronte all'atomica." *La Stampa*, 1 April 1954.

35 Van Laak, Dirk. "Technokratie im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts – eine einflussreiche 'Hintergrundideologie'." In: *Theorien und Experimente der Moderne. Europas Gesellschaften im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Lutz Rafael, 101–128. Köln: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012, 123.

36 De Ritis cites the examples of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). De Ritis, Beniamino. "Il mistero delle maiuscole." *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 1953.

demic fields during the Cold War. "*Ten years ago, technocracy* [...] *was at best a keyword for informal discussions in small sociological circles,*" the German sociologists Claus Koch and Dieter Senghaas wrote in 1970.[37] Now, the authors found, its usage had become increasingly widespread everywhere in West Germany: academics, student protesters, and politicians alike made use of the term to express a seemingly indistinct criticism of a wide range of present-day problems and conflicts.[38] In parallel to what occurred in the 1930s, this second "technocracy frenzy" extended far beyond the German-speaking world. When in 1969 *The New York Times* called the former Nazi functionary Albert Speer a technocrat, a member of the now almost forgotten, but still existing Technocracy Inc. was quick to denounce this supposed improper terminology: "*I've heard of Premier Trudeau, 'the technocrat'* [...] *and of so-called technocrats in all parts of the world, but the latest reference in* The New York Times Magazine *is going too far.*"[39]

One of the reasons for technocracy's renewed and inflationary use also lay in the fact that, during the 1960s, the notion became heavily politicized. In the context of Europe's economic "planning enthusiasm,"[40] the concepts of technocracy and the technocrat would once again reveal their intertwinement with different imaginaries of progress and modernity. In this regard, the Italian case is particularly telling. From the mid-1960s onward, a number of moderate left-wing cabinets implemented the so-called *programmazione economica*, Italy's state-led, partial planning effort of the

37 Koch, Claus, and Dieter Senghaas, eds. *Texte zur Technokratiediskussion*. Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1970, 5.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Sheldon, John. "Speer is no Technocrat." *The New York Times*, 16 November 1969.

40 When referring to the 1960s and early 1970s, the German expressions *Planungsenthusiasmus* and *Planungseuphorie* describe a period marked by intense belief in humanity's future as an entirely "plannable reality." Whether in the field of economic policymaking, city architecture, or landscaping, planning seemingly became the "cure for all ills." See: van Laak, Dirk. "Planung, Planbarkeit und Planungseuphorie." *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 16 February 2010. http://docupedia.de/zg/van_laak_planung_v1_de_2010 (access: 12 June 2025); Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard, and Jörg Requate, eds. *Aufbruch in die Zukunft. Die 1960er Jahre zwischen Planungseuphorie und kulturellem Wandel. DDR, CSSR und Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2004.

national economy and industry.[41] Heavily criticized by some, cheered on by others, the *programmazione economica* has to be counted as among the most divisive topics in Italian political history. Soon, in fact, there was a heated back and forth between state functionaries and representatives of the private industry, with the former convinced of the state interventions' positive outcome and the latter feeling cheated out of their right to have a say in the political arena. Before long, both camps would fall back on the term technocracy in order to voice criticism of their opponents' positions. In 1968, Giuseppe Togni, the president of Italy's Managerial Federation (CIDA), called for close cooperation between the private and the public. Otherwise, also in light of the *programmazione*, Togni feared that "*technocracy might conquer the centers of decision-making.*"[42] Meanwhile, Giorgio Petrilli, the president of the state-owned Institute of Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) and a vocal supporter of the *programmazione economica*, fell back on the term technocracy when voicing criticism of what he perceived as Western societies' excessive privatization. According to Petrilli, only state-led interventions in the economic field could reverse a process that had recently seen "*economic decision-making*" being handed to "*a small group of technocrats*," in this case managers of private industry.[43] These examples are quite revealing with regard to the fluctuating nature of interpretations of technocracy. The clashing views surrounding a Europe-wide euphoria over a politically and economically plannable future once again brought to light not only the negative connotations of technocracy, but also its interpretation as an obstacle to progress and modernity – either as an enemy of neoliberalism or of state-led consumer engineering.[44]

41 See, for instance: Rangone, Nicoletta. *Le programmazioni economiche. L'intervento pubblico in economia tra piani e regolazioni.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007.

42 "Auspicata più collaborazione tra politici e tecnici." *Corriere della Sera*, 26 January 1968.

43 ACS (Archivio Centrale dello Stato), Fondo IRI, Numerazione nera, serie 2: Presidente, serie 1: Giuseppe Petrilli, serie 2: Scritti e discorsi, busta 32: Programmazione e personalità umana, Vortragstext, Collegio Ghislieri, Pavia, 29 March 1968.

44 Logemann, Jan, Gary Cross, and Ingo Köhler, eds. *Consumer Engineering, 1920s–1970s: Marketing Between Expert Planning and Consumer Responsiveness.* Berlin: Springer, 2019.

As the enthusiasm for planning gradually faded everywhere over the course of the 1970s, the trend of associating technocracy with statism would only intensify. Now, the term was essentially equated with a series of failed economic planning programs and mainly used to "stereotype an enemy image," that of the technocrat as a machine-like individual steering political and economic decisions, completely void of human emotion.[45] This clearly put technocracy at odds with an important global trend at the time: the movement that was born from the 1968 social uprisings, gained momentum through the Vietnam War, and was marked by a widespread public push for the progressive humanization and ethicization of politics. As a consequence, at least until its third revival around the turn of the 21st century in the context of the European technocratic governments, the term technocracy would be shunned as a progress-opposing relic of the past, something once again mainly associated either with polarizing notions such as statism and socialism, or with the traditional man-machine-dilemma.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE LONG SHADOWS OF TECHNOCRACY

As has been shown in the previous sections, the understanding of the term technocracy changed noticeably over the course of just three decades, from the 1930s, through to the end of World War II, and into the early decades of the Cold War. The changes in the idea of progress mirrored in these varying interpretations cannot be overlooked. The article has shown how, in the context of the 20th century, the term technocracy has been mainly used to express specific, future-oriented criticisms of the present with regard to scientific, societal, or political progress. Such criticisms could frame progress as lacking or, on the contrary, as excessive. In this sense, the partial conceptual history of technocracy presented here has revealed complex and widely different phases of the understanding of modernity and progress, from the US to Germany and Italy, touching on some of our recent history's most important phenomena, such as capitalism and socia-

45 Lenk, Hans. *Technokratie als Ideologie: Sozialphilosophische Beiträge zu einem politischen Dilemma.* Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1973, 155.

lism, democracy and totalitarianism, as well as the discourses surrounding technologies and weapons in times of war and peace. It is important to stress that the multifaceted meaning of technocracy and its many uses are not only revealing with regard to the past century, as it has proven to be a key term in the analysis of complex present-day phenomena as well, such as populism, supranational institution-building, and policymaking. It is indeed no coincidence that, since the 1990s and the creation of the first so-called technocratic governments, the term technocracy has witnessed renewed attention in political and public discourse. The fact that Elon Musk has been called a technocrat by many is not surprising; what may raise some eyebrows, however, is the direct parallel being drawn between his politics and that of Technocracy Inc.[46] Such examples show how promising the conceptual analysis of the multifaceted notion of technocracy really is: to this day, the term is able to tie together imaginaries of modernities of both the past and present by continuing to challenge convictions of either static or teleological progress, not only on a local or national, but also on an international level.

46 Hiltscher, Johannes. "Technocracy, Inc.: Elon Musk und das Erbe der Technokraten." *Golem*, 12 September 2024. https://www.golem.de/news/technocracy-inc-elon-musk-und-das-erbe-der-technokraten-2409-188232.html (access: 13 June 2025).

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POVZETEK

Danes izraz »tehnokracija« raziskovalci označujejo kot pojmovno ohlapen, kljub temu pa je tudi izjemno razširjen. V 21. stoletju se je pojavil v političnem diskurzu kot priročna upodobitev sovražnika predvsem med desnopopulističnimi strankami in gibanji. Toda zakaj je prav tehnokracija postala tako vsesplošno prisotna beseda v političnih in javnih razpravah?

Članek sledi zgodovini tega spornega pojma skozi 20. stoletje in skuša pokazati, da vzpon tehnokracije še zdaleč ni bil zgolj nacionalni pojav. Njeno širjenje je mogoče v veliki meri pripisati edinstveni zmožnosti pojma, da izrazi kritične odzive na to, kar je bilo razumljeno kot pretirani družbeni, znanstveni ali industrijski napredek. Od tridesetih let 20. stoletja dalje je postala prav zaradi te značilnosti tehnokracija v razpravah o napredku še posebej privlačna – ne le v medijih in širši javnosti, temveč tudi med politiki in ekonomskimi vplivneži.

Zgodnje širjenje pojma tehnokracije je povezano predvsem z ameriškim inženirjem Howardom Scottom, ki je ob začetku tridesetih let pojem postavil v središče svoje kritike kapitalizma in predlagal, da naj bi politično odločanje prevzeli strokovnjaki in inženirji. Preplet »vladavine strokovnjakov« z mehanizirano proizvodnjo in nezaupanjem v obstoječe politične elite je sprožil prve obsežne razprave o tehnokraciji – hkrati kot obljubi racionalnega napredka in kot nevarni odmik v avtoritarno »vladavino stroja«. Pojem je hitro prodrl tudi v Evropo, kjer sta ga fašistična Italija in nacistična Nemčija preoblikovali in uporabili za lastne predstave o modernosti in tehnološki preobrazbi družbe.

Po drugi svetovni vojni se je pomen pojma spremenil, saj so tehnokracijo vse pogosteje povezovali z antikomunizmom in strahom pred jedrsko znanostjo. Obenem se je razširil tudi na področje ekonomskega upravljanja: od jedrskih fizikov in vojaških strategov do birokratov v mednarodnih institucijah, povsod je bil »tehnokrat« vse pogosteje podoba odtujene elite, odrezane od moralnih in demokratičnih vrednot. V šestdesetih letih se je

razumevanje pojma ponovno spremenilo, ko je tehnokracija postala del sporov o državnem gospodarskem načrtovanju.

Članek torej na primerih Združenih držav, Nemčije in Italije pokaže, da je tehnokracija skozi zadnje stoletje delovala kot pojmovno ogledalo ideje napredka, ki je odsevalo njene neprestane preobrazbe v različnih nacionalnih okoljih ter v širših mednarodnih okvirih.

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