The Politics of Past and Progress in Jacksonian Democracy

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The 1820s-40s—commonly referred to as the Jacksonian era, as they were dominated by the presidency of Andrew Jackson—constitute a landmark in the history of the early republic, given the specific chronological relationship those decades entertained with the founding period of the United States. What chronicler John O'Sullivan called in 1839 the "Great Nation of Futurity" was in fact a young nation born only sixty-three years earlier, which therefore had no other choice but to develop a complex attitude to its present progress given its founding ideals. A sign of this was the way in which an ambivalent language of past and progress became an inherent part of political discourse, which took on conflicting meanings depending on who used it.

Indeed, with the advent of universal white manhood suffrage in all but three states by the mid-1820s, there was a sense of definite political progress, which was summed up in the recurrent celebration of democracy as the best political system, understood as an improvement over the more deferential and elitist system of the late eighteenth century of the Founding Fathers. Antebellum United States was thus the exemplary "nation of progress," as Jacksonian democracy could not mean anything else than the actual realization of the (political) equality which had remained only a project in the Declaration of Independence. The historical progress celebrated by the Enlightenment took on a scientific turn and what was rationally to be hoped for became historically inevitable: "we must onward towards the realization of our mission" (Hobsbawm 289).

Yet while the Jacksonians seemed entirely turned towards the further realization of their nation's progress, they found themselves faced, roughly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, with a fundamental heritage to deal with, that of the nation's initial project which they constantly turned back to in order to find some kind of legitimacy. What did the future and the rejection of the past mean when the only past of the new nation was precisely its founding moment, which could not be rejected in any way?[1]

Furthermore, what was the nature of the progress that was constantly being referred to, for the political progress embodied in the widening of suffrage had not led in all cases to equivalent socio-economic improvement? And what role should the government play in encouraging this improvement? These were the questions at the heart of the debates that opposed the Whigs to the Democrats, who made up the second party system in the 1830s. Yet, despite their partisan differences, the political and economic platforms of the political class were in turn denounced as a whole by the short-lived workingmen's movement of the late 1820s and early 1830s as well as by other reformers way into the 1840s. Far removed from the optimistic conception of progress expressed by the political elite, they denounced current inequalities and invoked another conception of progress, remindful of the values contained in the origins of the republic. In so doing, these "radicals" introduced into their criticism of the hegemonic discourse on progress the revolutionary past, which became part and parcel of their own conception of what improvement was about and which led to their being sometimes paradoxically labeled as "conservatives." From the ruling class to social critics, the politics of past and progress were not, so to speak, a culture war, but rather the mode through which the major political and economic debates of the era were articulated and a prism through which they can be understood.

The partisan debates pitting the Whigs against the Democrats in the 1820s-40s expressed themselves essentially in terms of *economic* progress, which can be traced back to the aftermath of the War of 1812, the "Second War for Independence," when the recent victory over England spurred a renewed sense of nationalism and acted as an incentive to consolidate the new nation (see Watts). National cohesion was to be put into practice through a policy of internal *improvements*—not a neutral term—focused on creating a coherently planned economic system to "'bind the republic together'" (Calhoun, qtd. in Wood 315) so as to provide the best conditions for domestic growth, protected from foreign competition thanks to a high tariff. This promotion of a national network was at the heart of Henry Clay's "American System"—inspired as it was by Daniel Raymond's political economics, it stood at the center of the Whigs' platform as of 1834—, founded on an interventionist government, essentially active at a state level in financing internal improvements through the incorporation of chartered companies (Watson 34ff). The financial regulation of this rapidly growing nationalized economy was to be accomplished by the central Bank of the United States.

The question of the renewal of the charter of the Bank of the United States even came to symbolize the central issue at stake in these two competing conceptions of economic progress. Indeed to the Whig state-spon-

sored "improvement" plans, the Democrats responded with a defense of *laissez-faire* and of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, by invoking the interests of independent small producers and entrepreneurs as well as farmers, in other words the "real people," (Meyers 18-24), all opposed to a protective tariff, a national bank, or any form of state intervention in the economy or in any other matter. (Jackson, "Farewell").

At first sight, two discourses seemed indeed to clash: the Whigs' vision of a national and state-sponsored economic progress against the Democrats' opposition to government involvement in economic progress, which they denounced in Adam Smith's terms as contrary to equality and natural progress. This difference of "mode" in approaching progress is made explicit in the opening lines of Jackson's veto to the financing of the Maysville Road in 1830: "Sincerely friendly to the improvement of our country by means of roads and canals, I regret that any difference of opinion in the mode of contributing to it should exist between us" (1046). Hence the Democratic party never lost sight of its commitment to progress, always presenting itself as the "party of progress," the "movement party," or "party of the future," and was defended as such by its followers—"the democratic principle is most emphatically a principle of movement, of progress, of reform"—; the Whig party was thus logically rejected as the "stationary or stand-still party," or also "party of the past" (O'Sullivan, "Duty" 440). Historians have long been debating as to which of the two parties was indeed the most progressive: mid-twentieth century historians such as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., saw the Whigs and the Democrats as defending radically different social classes in the urban population, whereas according to the consensus historians of the 1950s onward, both parties were identified as participating in the building of liberal capitalism, albeit with differing methods: the Jacksonians were accused of populist opportunism, seeking not so much the defense of the people but encouraging ambitious entrepreneurs in their efforts to take over the Whig paternalistic control of the economy. More recent historiography in the wake of the new social history shows a return to a differentiated appreciation of both parties.

That this historiographical question has remained unsettled is not very surprising, all the more so as the parties themselves rhetorically played on a dual approach: the Democrats, while presenting themselves as the most progressive, simultaneously invoked the past as an antidote to the destructive progress invoked by the Whigs. Jeffersonian nostalgia in particular was recurrent in the speeches of the Jacksonian Democrats, as they clearly posed as the "Keepers of the Jeffersonian conscience" (Schlesinger, *Age* 18), or as the true heirs of the Founders, echoed by Jackson himself in his famous "Bank Veto Message": "It is time to pause in our career to review our principles, and if possible revive that devoted patriotism and spirit

of compromise which distinguished the sages of the Revolution and the fathers of our Union" (1153).

Whether Whig or Democrat, both parties constantly referred to the founding past, which was necessarily still very present in the national memory. While they had been too young to take part in the actual revolutionary struggle, all these politicians had been born during or right after the founding period and raised in the first decades of the republic. Turning back to the foundation of the republic was thus compulsory for either party, as shown for instance in the choice for their early party denominations: they were initially "Democratic republicans" and "National republicans," the reference to the "republic" and to Jefferson being a *sine qua non* condition of their identity and credibility.

Yet what appeared to be essentially a discursive opposition over the idea of progress did not fool the short-lived Workingmen parties that emerged in the late 1820s. The workingmen's movement originally started in Philadelphia in 1827, after a carpenters' strike in favor of the ten-hour working day, which led to the creation of Philadelphia's Mechanics' Union and Trade Associations. This unionizing was followed shortly after by an entry into politics with the first Workingmen's party in 1828 in Philadelphia, imitated by similar parties in New York and Boston respectively in 1829 and 1830, which all presented candidates in local elections. The New York party in particular, which obtained 31% of the votes in November 1829, was originally organized around the reformers Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen, and George Evans and was quickly dominated by two successive factions to be finally absorbed by the Democratic party who won back the Workingmen's votes everywhere as of 1832.[2]

For these defenders of the rights of the working men, there was no question the widening of suffrage meant democratic progress and they were set on encouraging its use as a right but also on reminding the working population of "the important duties of the ELECTOR": "To the electoral franchise we must look as the redeeming power that will improve our condition—and without an enlightened exercise of its provisions, the sufferings of our Revolutionary Ancestors will have been in vain" (Connell 338).

The right to vote for candidates in the already-existing parties was nevertheless not deemed sufficient; a new party had to be created alongside the Democratic Party which ran counter to true democratic progress. Beyond the extended *political* right to suffrage, the priority was indeed the recognition of *social* rights for the working men, such as the ten-hour working day and the end of the imprisonment for debt, as well as the access to public education. In favor of *laissez-faire*, the Workingmen's Party supported the Jacksonian rejection of the national bank; but beyond Jackson's Bank Veto, they denounced any form of monopoly and especially the multiply-

ing corporations. In their periodicals such as the *Free Enquirer or the Working Man's Advocate*, they debated all subjects that caused a threat to small producers and urban artisans, and they favored equal access to economic opportunity as well as to all forms of improvement from religious freedom to educational or property reform.

Hence the rejection of the false economic progress of the Whigs and the Democrats alike was seen as increasing social inequalities and the loss of independence of a growing class of propertyless wage-earners (Foner 60ff). To the glorified belief in a supposed progress of the American nation since Independence, workingmen responded by their own absolute belief in progress, essentially social as well as intellectual: "The working classes . . . have hitherto had but little time to improve their minds or form their manner." (*Free Enquirer* 19 Aug. 1830). In so doing, they stepped away from "the whole science, so-called, of political economy" (Wright, "Wealth" 406) and together with reformers and social critics on either side of the Atlantic welcomed the new social sciences, imported from Europe, with Owen, Charles Fourier, or the Saint-Simonians. (Martin Burke 76). Their role was thus not to refuse progress but to denounce what they believed was the wrong path on the road to progress taken by the ruling class.

In order to disprove so-called improvements and to show the current contradictions with the original founding project, the original American mission was once again appealed to. As part of the same attempts at grounding the new American nation in history—see the increasingly popular Fourth of July orations in the very period—and as exemplified by the Democrats' and the Whigs' reference to the legacy of the Founding Fathers, the reformers who tried to spur the working men into political action discovered their inspiration in the founding period. The first step was to set party affiliations straight: contrary to what the Jacksonian Democrats claimed, they were not Jefferson's true heirs. Only the Workingmen's Party was the true Democratic Party, "*the Nation's party*, the party which Jefferson, if he yet lived, would receive and recognize as his own" (*Free Enquirer* 8 May 1830). The point was further to call workers to action by inviting them to complete the American Revolution, "interrupted in its progress":

> It was time for America to give evidence to the world of her advancement in civilization. . . . She owed it to herself and she owed it to the human race, to exhibit once more in healthy action, that moral energy she displayed in her revolution, and which her free institutions should have nurtured and purified, not quelled and perverted. (*Free Enquirer* 8 May 1830)

Pointing to the Declaration of Independence which "lies open beside the speaker," Wright in her 1830 "Parting Address" called every reformer to "put into practice" the ideas "engraved" by the Founding Fathers: "To com-

mence the practical illustration of the truths proclaimed to the world by the fathers of this nation, is what we ask at this day." Or in a more nostalgic mode: "Would the people return to the principles of the revolution...!" ("Origins" 221).

This constant appeal to the founding past has played a role in the perception that contemporary historians have had of this party. The historiographical discussion over the ideological nature of the Workingmen's Party in the Jacksonian era is actually to be understood as part of a broader debate initially launched by Werner Sombart in his famous article "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" Labor historians of the early republic, such as Alan Dawley or Bruce Laurie, generally stress the absence of a real American labor party in the period, explicitly aimed at defending class interests as there existed in Europe. These "workingmen" were in fact skilled artisans, mechanics but also small entrepreneurs, i.e., a middling class interested in joining forces in order to protect its independent economic status against the threats linked to the increase of monopolies and accelerated proletarianization brought about by the beginning of industrialization. As a proof of their lack of radical claims, they quickly rejected any demands towards the redistribution of property, which appeared solely on the platform of Thomas Skidmore's Committee of Fifty. For historians such as Sean Wilentz, on the other hand, the United States was not a liberal exception (as claimed in particular by Lewis Hartz); it had a working class which experienced class-consciousness but which expressed itself through a republican rhetoric inherited from the eighteenth century ("Against Exceptionalism"). Yet rather than genuine republican radicalism, Christopher Lasch identified in the systematic opposition to progress among social critics such as Thomas Paine, William Cobbet, or Orestes Brownson a certain form of populism which blended republicanism and liberalism and was opposed to any form of economic and technical progress: "the producer ethic . . . was anticapitalist but not socialist or social democratic, at once radical, even revolutionary, and deeply conservative" (205). Anti-progressivism was thus according to Lasch not motivated by political or class-consciousness, but by the necessity to stop the advance of capitalism. In the same way, according to Nick Salvatore, the constant patriotic quoting of American values as they appeared in many essays refutes the idea of any form of class-consciousness. In the call for a return to the late-eighteenth-century revolutionary spirit, he sees in their words and action no desire to put into question the very structure of American politics, no invitation to transformation, but rather a consensus reaffirmation of American values: "the ultimate motivation was to return to the political and economic conditions that more accurately reflected their understanding of America's tradition and promise"; these social critics were in no way radicals but

rather conservatives or even reactionaries (28).

Conservatives or radicals? If historians disagree, antebellum contemporaries themselves seemed to be unclear about these categories. Brownson, a reformer and social critic who had participated in the very formation of the New-York Workingmen's Party alongside Owen and Wright and was always on the search for the best realization of social equality, offered a multifaceted response to this political puzzle. Given Brownson's complicated life-course fraught with many changes of direction[3] and hesitations, he was categorized by his contemporaries—as well as by ours—as either radical or conservative: seeking to account for his sudden change of opinion, his Democratic colleague O'Sullivan, after having defended him against accusations of extreme radicalism, finally saw him as the very example of "the young liberal . . . so often metamorphosed into the old conservative" ("Note" 537). Rather than a linear change, one could argue that his very intellectual trajectory typified the lack of clarity surrounding these notions, the relation of the young nation to its revolutionary past at the center of the matter.

Influenced as he was by his readings of not only such utopian socialists as Saint-Simon or Owen but also by the liberal thinker Benjamin Constant, Brownson was undoubtedly an ardent believer in human progress, whether it be social or individual, political or religious: "The theory of our institutions rests on the progressive nature of man and society"; "The real dominant sentiment of our epoch is that of social progress"; "we believe in the indefinite perfectibility of man and society"; and "the irresistible tendency of the human race is to advancement" was what he claimed throughout the reviews which he edited or contributed to *Boston Quarterly Review* and *Christian Examiner* from 1828 to 1840. This belief initially made him join Wright and Owen's *Free Enquirer* and led him shortly after to create his own *Herald of Reform* to encourage the setting up of a system of free public education; it could equally be found at the basis of the foundation of his Society for Christian Progress in order to preach social progress to the Boston workers, or what incited him to support the Massachusetts Democratic Party for a while ("the movement party, or party of the future, of progress"). Spurred ahead by his unrelenting belief in social progress and horrified by the consequence of the great economic panics of 1837 and 1839, he even went beyond the platform of the Democratic Party and chose to speak for the workers, ten years after the dissolution of their party: following his defense of the Lowell girls (April 1841), he went on to denounce "wage slavery" and the principle of hereditary property in his most famous essay "The Laboring Classes," published in July and October 1840 in his *Boston Quarterly Review*. Yet, after the popular vote in favor of the Whigs in November 1844, he turned away from politics and expressed a fierce

distrust in popular sovereignty. This was when he converted to Catholicism which he embraced until the end of his life. He, who was to be nicknamed "marxist before Marx" by the progressive historian Schlesinger (317), had become an arch-conservative, according to Russell Kirk, the historian of conservatism in American thought (267-68).

As it happens "conservatism" and "radicalism" were relatively new ideological categories at the time, as the two epithets had served to refer to the two ideological positions taken in favor of or against the French Revolution. While he was fully aware of the necessity to define these two terms, Brownson refused to fit neatly in one camp or the other. Rather than clarifying the two notions in relationship to one another, he further increased the confusion, namely in a dialogue published in his Review, pointedly titled "Conversations with a Radical; By A Conservative." Indeed, determined as he was to disconcert his reader from the very title onwards, he alternatively identified with the Radical or the Conservative. In the very content of the dialogue, as one can recognize in the mouth of either one of most of his social convictions, in the very form as well, as "by a conservative" leads one to believe that he is the conservative author of this first-person dialogue, this initial impression disappears as one progressively recognizes numerous biographical elements in both the mouths of the Radical and the Conservative ("Laboring Classes").

The confusion between both "characters" was precisely his point. Rather than opposed options, "the Conservative and Radical should be combined in the same individual" ("Editorial Address" n.pag.). In the dialogue, Brownson introduced himself as a Radical "of a different kind" to the surprised "Conservative": "You are a strange Radical: I knew not before that Radicals ever thought of the Past save to condemn it."

Thanks to what he meant as a synthesis of "past" and "progress," Brownson seemed to represent both Burke and Paine at once, the archetypal conservative and radical in the famous debate over the French Revolution, in that he encouraged change while refusing the revolutionaries' *tabula rasa*" (Marienstras 372-74). Indeed he criticized any extremist mode that implied a rejection of the past in a reforming enterprise, and while he always sought social reform, he disavowed reform efforts that broke definitely with the past. This criticism was directed in particular to the Transcendentalists whom he had joined for a while in Boston and to the Emersonian indictment of the spirit of the times: "Our Age is retrospective."

The point was to reform without sweeping away past results. To the *tabula rasa* he preferred the past understood as a "past progress" and therefore as "point of departure for new progress" ("Reform" 63). What was proposed here was cautious progress allied with order. In this, Brownson reflected the conception of progress held by other American and European

counterparts such as the one advocated by Saint-Simon or Auguste Comte ("Community" 144).

Beyond these abstracted notions more or less convincingly conveyed by Brownson, progress allied to the past as he presented it essentially remained a celebration of the recent past of the young nation, and more particularly the Jeffersonian past conjured up as a barrier against Jacksonian change. This was clearly an idealized past, that of "the spirit of 1798" and the anti-federalist defense of states' rights against any federal tyranny, which equally represented an aspiration for social justice founded on the agrarian hope of everyone's access to property. The memory of Jefferson could thus express the promise of a republic striving towards equality and peopled by small independent owners, as the only alternative to the hegemonic conception of economic progress which entailed increasing the class of "wage slaves."[4] Yet, rather than a clear-cut confrontation between defenders of progress and nostalgics of the past, we are left with often contradictory positions that can be seen as actually expressing the confusion, even the disarray of antebellum years, as they simultaneously blended an indefectible faith in progress as an absolute scientific law with a fierce distrust of this same progress articulated in terms of a reminiscence of past revolutionary and post-revolutionary values. The hesitation between a "conservative" and "radical" position, or even the convergence between radical and conservative criticism (Hobsbawm 290; Wiebe 59) translated the difficulty to find a coherent response to the emerging liberal democracy.

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Notes

[1] On the centrality of "innovation" in the early republic, see John Lauritz Larson 166.

[2] Thomas Skidmore, the leader of the New York Party from April to December 1829, created his own party as of the end of 1829, the independent Equal Rights Party as a result of a split inside the Workingmen's Movement (Robert Dale Owen and George Evans on the one hand and a small-merchant-and artisans-dominated faction led by Noah Cook and Henry G. Guyon which finally took over). See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850.*

[3] Orestes Brownson was born in 1803 in Vermont and from his early childhood traveled not only from place to place in New England and New York (with a short stay in Illinois as a young adult), but also from one Protestant denomination to another — he was successively a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, a Free Thinker, and a Unitarian—before converting to Catholicism in the middle of his life. Always looking for the best possible society, his religious concerns were closely linked to his political beliefs which led him to move in and out

of political organizations such as the short-lived Workingmen's Movement in New York at the end of the 1820s or the Democratic Party in Boston, before he rejected parties altogether as he found his definitive faith.

[4] As shown by Merrill Peterson, the memory of Thomas Jefferson could be claimed both as the liberal father of democracy or as the conservative father of states' rights.

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