ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Political realism and the quest for political progress

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, we propose to develop a realist interpretation of political progress—that is, an analysis of what it means to achieve better conditions of life in society under political power according to realist standards. Specifically, we are interested in identifying the criteria according to which political realism defines a change in the status quo as a desirable change.

If our attempt is convincing, political realism will advance in two respects. First, our interpretation of political progress represents a theoretical effort that stands between purely methodological works on political realism (for example, Favara, 2021; Galston, 2010; Hall, 2017; Rossi & Sleat, 2014) and the scholarship on applied realist normativity (for example, Beetz & Rossi, 2017; Bellamy, 2010; Cozzaglio, 2020; Jubb, 2015), which allows it to offer tools to bridge the gap between abstract and practical interpretations of realist normativity. Our account stands between these two theoretical efforts in the following ways. First, through our interpretation of political progress, we provide some insight into political judgment in a realist sense. Second, we provide general realist guidelines to evaluate political changes.

As for the second advance, advocates and critics of political realism have recently engaged in a growing debate about the normative import of realist normativity. Political realists have often been seen either as compliant with the status quo or as silently relying on moral principles in order to grant any normative import to their political theories.[1] At stake is the normative capacity of political realism itself and, consequently, its ability to offer political guidance for making progress in society. Although realists have provided a number of responses to the accusation of status quo bias (for example, Favara, 2021; Finlayson, 2017; Jubb, 2019), developing a realist notion of political progress would further show that such criticism is undeserved.

However, speaking of political progress in realist terms presents some challenges. If realists want to be loyal to their methodological commitment—namely, the priority of politics over morality—they need to rethink the notion of progress in a way that is not based on prepolitical moral assumptions. As we discuss below, such a methodological constraint exposes a realist interpretation of political progress to charges of inconsistency, excessive conservatism, and ideological bias. Hence, by defending our interpretation of realist political progress, we aim to counter such possible worries as well.

Our article is structured as follows. In section 2, we explain the fundamental requirements that a notion of political progress must satisfy in order to be considered a realist notion of progress and the main challenges that a realist account of progress needs to meet to consistently abide by the requirements. In section 3, we present our notion of realist political progress as composed of three dimensions: inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection. Section 4 shows the contextualist nature of our notion of progress by distinguishing concept and conceptions of progress. Finally, we argue for the merits of realist political progress and address possible objections to our account (sections 5 and 6).

2 | A REALIST ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL PROGRESS: REQUIREMENTS AND CHALLENGES

It is notably not easy to define what political realism consists in. Indeed, the theorists who have been labeled as realists come from a number of different backgrounds. Relatedly, we cannot claim that the account offered here is either exhaustive of political realism or uncontroversial. Still, because some family resemblances among realist political thinkers can be traced (McQueen, 2017), we believe that the account we propose offers a consistent and viable version of a realist political normativity. Political realism originated as a reaction to what Williams (2005) has called "moralism" in political theory—that is, the idea that political theory is reducible to "applied morality" (p. 2). In contrast to the moralist approach, Williams and contemporary realists argue that politics should be regulated by a distinctively political normativity grounded on at least three commitments.

First, political realists conceive of their work neither as a study of political reality nor as a mere application of political theories to specific circumstances, but rather as a theoretical approach that grounds its normativity on the very definition of politics as different from domination (Sleat, 2016b). Some crucial features of political practices cannot be ignored when aiming to offer an adequate normative theory of politics: political practices are structured around power relationships and are permeated by conflicts of values and interests (Geuss, 2008; Rossi & Sleat, 2014). Relatedly, politics is primarily devoted to achieving order and to an effective and responsible[2] use of power, despite the conflicts found in political contexts. So, politics is not reducible to successful domination.

Second, realists argue that normative political theory should be sensitive to the political reality under assessment. As realists have often lamented, much contemporary political philosophy either tends to derive political theories from moral theories or is not sufficiently attentive to the complexity, specificities, and challenges of political reality (Geuss, 2008; Philp, 2008; Williams, 2005). According to realists, a lack of sensitivity to political reality is responsible for generating political theories that are normatively irrelevant (Honig, 1993; Horton, 2010b; Newey, 2001), descriptively inadequate (Horton, 2010a, 2010b), or even dangerous in actual political circumstances (Geuss, 2008; Mills, 2005). For this reason, political standards must not merely be normative tools that apply to politics; rather, they must be informed and shaped by an appraisal of what politics is in the first place. This feature counters a source of misunderstanding that identifies political realism as an investigation into the feasibility constraints that ought to apply to political theories (Valentini, 2012; but see Sleat, 2016a). Political theory ought to be an essentially practice-dependent endeavor, one in which political practices should be considered not as mere fields of application of independently stated norms, but rather as sources of normative knowledge (Galston, 2010; Jubb, 2016; Sangiovanni, 2008). This commitment makes political realism a contextualist approach to political normativity and motivates realists' distancing of themselves from

any normative theory with universalist pretenses. Relatedly, realist political theories must be understood as provisional, revisable, and conditionally constructed.

Notwithstanding these two aspects, many realists believe that the distinctiveness of political normativity must not preclude the possibility of making moral considerations in politics. For example, Matt Sleat clarifies that antimoralism is far from fully rejecting the role of morality in politics (Sleat, 2021); rather, it requires that morality should not be the sole and ultimate ground for political standards. Moral values held by agents in specific historical and cultural circumstances play a role in justifying political power precisely because these values make sense to those subject to the political authority. In this sense, these values do not represent a morality external, or prior, to politics (Sleat, 2014).

Finally, realists regard the critique of ideologies as a fundamental task of political theorizing. Following Raymond Geuss (1981), ideologies represent "the beliefs the members of the group hold, the concepts they use, the attitudes and psychological disposition they exhibit, their motives, desires, values, predilections, works of art, religious rituals, gestures, etc." (p. 5) and are therefore ineliminable elements of any political context. Ideology critique is, in turn, a process of reflection in which the foundation, genealogy, and consistency of beliefs are scrutinized (see Williams, 2002, pp. 225–32). Since starting from an undistorted appraisal of political reality is one of the core commitments of realist political theory, it becomes essential to get rid of those ideologies that result from false beliefs and contribute to forming a distorted picture of power relationships (Geuss, 2008). This concern becomes especially relevant for scrutinizing the effects of power in political relations, as beliefs can be actively manipulated by those who exercise power by distorting, hiding, or spreading information (Williams, 2002, 2005).

So far, we have described what we take to be the main distinguishing features of realist political thought. Why, within this theoretical framework, is the attempt to provide an account of political progress troublesome? There are three reasons.

First, contextualism might seem inconsistent with an account of political progress, as it seems to prevent the possibility of distancing oneself from and criticizing the status quo. Against the realists' commitment to elaborating standards that vary across time and space, some may argue that a meaningful notion of political progress ought to presuppose unchangeable standards of evaluation, valid independently of the circumstances under consideration (Godlovitch, 2002).[3] Absent those independent standards, it would seem unjustified to univocally describe political changes as progressions or regressions.

Moreover, without a fixed and independent standard of evaluation that makes comparative judgments possible, the idea of progress would seem to lose its appeal and its most authentic meaning. Hence, for instance, we intuitively regard the abolition of slavery as a political change that counts as progress independently from the circumstances considered. In contrast, refusing to formulate judgments that claim universal validity seems to impoverish both the notion of political progress and its utility. Relatedly, political realists, to defend their normative approach from such criticism, need to explain how we can justify universal judgments such as the one against slavery without losing track of the contextual features informing political standards.

Finally, earlier we mentioned that political realism demands that one engage in a process of ideology critique as a prerequisite for achieving an undistorted comprehension of political reality.[4] Some realists, most notably Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi, have argued that realist political theorizing ought to be exclusively conducted by engaging in a process of criticizing ideologies, thereby refraining from outlining any substantive normative theory. According to Prinz and Rossi (2017, p. 355), this must be the case because every normative theory, by adopting a certain conceptual toolbox as a starting point, ends up examining and judging political reality through the lenses of some prepolitical, and hence nonrealist, notions. Accordingly, both realists and critics might argue that elaborating a conception of political progress is already an ideological move, one that "imposes" a certain interpretative meaning on the political circumstances that need to be understood.[5]

In the following, we develop an account of political progress that is able to both consistently abide by the fundamental theoretical commitments of realist political thought and address the challenges just outlined.

3 | A REALIST INTERPRETATION OF POLITICAL PROGRESS

Before elaborating the features of our notion of political progress, let us note that Bernard Williams's idea of a political relationship stands as the background of our reflection.[6] Williams (2005) speaks of a political relationship as the solution to the "'first' political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (p. 3). Significantly, not all exercises of power aimed at establishing order and cooperation are necessarily legitimate; a solution to the first political question needs to be "acceptable," meaning it needs to not recreate the problem in response to which a political relationship was established in the first place. In this sense, a regime of terror does not count as an acceptable solution to the first political question (pp. 4—5).

The *basic legitimation demand* (BLD) discriminates between acceptable and unacceptable solutions by presenting the following requirements. First, a justification for the exercise of political power, backed by coercion, must be offered "to each subject" (Williams, 2005, p. 4). Even so, some subjects seem to be excluded from the justificatory enterprise. The "radically disadvantaged," Williams continues, are the ones to whom nothing can be said "to explain why they shouldn't revolt" (p. 5). Legitimacy is therefore a scalar notion: regimes are more or less legitimate depending on how widespread the condition of radical disadvantage is. Second, "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified" (p. 6). This is what Williams names the "critical theory principle." Put differently, subjects' acceptance of power does not count if the acceptance results from the regime's manipulation of them. Finally, the justification must make sense as an intelligible political order, given the historical and cultural circumstances (pp. 10—11).

The BLD encapsulates Williams's (2005) broader idea of what a realist political theory should look like: "I want a broader view of the content of politics, not confined to interests, together with a more realistic view of the powers, opportunities, and limitations of political actors, where all the considerations that bear on political action—both ideals, and, for example, political survival—can come to one focus of decision" (p. 12). In this sense, politics comprises more than the struggle for power and survival; it is also a complex set of claims and achievements. Relatedly, we argue, political progress cannot be understood only as an increase in stability and in the chances of survival but should rather be evaluated according to more articulated and multifaceted criteria.

In the following, we propose three criteria for evaluating political change: inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection. Yet before presenting them, a final remark is in order. We intend these criteria as guidelines for elaborating political judgments about societal changes, not features that, if maximally realized, would depict ideal political regimes. Relatedly, we do not conceive of realist political progress as a process of approximating ideal standards so defined. Rather, inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection are criteria that ought to be taken into consideration while assessing political changes, whose interaction cannot be constrained by fixed rules (for example, maximization) but ought to be established through contextual judgments.

The exact terms according to which such contextual judgments ought to be interpreted are clarified in section 4, where we tackle the difference between concept and conceptions of progress. For the moment, it is sufficient to remark that as inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection are guidelines for elaborating political judgments, the resulting notion of progress does not presuppose either a blueprint of the progressive political regime or any ideal of realist legitimacy.

As noted, a realist notion of political progress has three levels: inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection. The first one stems from the very idea of a political relationship as "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (Williams, 2005, p. 3). In fact, realists from different camps converge on the idea that politics is primarily an attempt to bring order and cooperation in circumstances of irresolvable and deep disagreement (Galston, 2010; Philp, 2010; Rossi, 2012).[7] We mentioned before that only some solutions to the first political question are acceptable, or, in the comparative language used here, some solutions are better than others. Relatedly, we say that political progress is a change from worse to better solutions to the first political question, where the quality of the solution depends on the decrease in the proportion of subjects who are in a position of radical disadvantage.

More specifically, we argue, political progress in inclusivity consists of an increase in the number of subjects to whom an acceptable justification for political power in terms of the provision of security, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation is provided. In this sense, we observe political progress anytime that, first, subjects to whom security was not guaranteed before are now guaranteed safety and protection; and second, subjects can now accept a justification of the exercise of power on the basis of the provision of security, safety, and protection, for such a justification reflects their actual receiving of protection. Put in different terms, we see political progress in inclusivity anytime that subjects exit from a relation of domination and enter into a political relationship with the political authority.

The second dimension of political progress is responsiveness. Recall that for realists, political standards must have a bottom-up source; that is, they need to be extrapolated from the political practice. Put differently, the ordering principles of a political community must match the values that are salient for the subjects living in that political community (Cozzaglio, 2021; Favara, 2021; Horton, 2012; Sagar, 2018; Sleat, 2014). Although the dimension of inclusivity considers the value of security as the primary and necessary one in a political relationship, we can plausibly expect that subjects require more than the provision of security and protection by the political authority. The dimension of responsiveness relates to the complex system of values and worldviews subjects hold about the political order they are coerced by. Accordingly, political progress in responsiveness consists in the increase in the extent to which subjects' values are taken by the regime as grounding the political order. It concerns values beyond subjects' claim to basic security. In other terms, responsiveness concerns the quality of the justification the regime provides to each subject, instead of the quantity of subjects to whom it provides a justification. Hence, responsiveness is distinct from inclusivity because the latter concerns the security of individuals who are provided with a justification for their being ruled, whereas the former concerns the compatibility of such justifications with subjects' values.

Finally, political progress can occur along the dimension of self-reflection. Recall Williams's (2005, p. 6) critical theory principle (CTP), according to which the acceptance of power cannot be produced by the same power that is to be justified. Where power is unequal, the CTP helps to shed light on the origin of a belief by asking whether subjects would still hold a given belief if they knew how it came about (Williams, 2002, p. 227). The CTP has inspired scholars belonging to different strands of political realism. Radical realists such as Rossi have interpreted it in epistemological terms in order to ground nonmoralistic vindicatory genealogy (Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2019). Others have taken steps beyond the CTP by developing internalist accounts of political legitimacy (Cozzaglio, 2021; Sagar, 2018). Still others have invoked it in order to delineate the difference between a political relationship and a relationship of domination, while eschewing an appeal to universal moral standards (Favara, 2021; Hall, 2017; Sleat, 2014). Regardless of these different emphases, realists agree that the CTP represents a form of critique that is compatible with antimoralism precisely because it is a form of internal critique—that is, one that does not presuppose a set of independent standards against which to measure power relationships.

Accordingly, we deem the CTP to play a crucial role in a realist interpretation of political progress; moreover, we believe that it is possible to develop a minimal criterion for political progress in self-reflection that fits with the different interpretations of the role of the CTP just outlined. We argue that progress in self-reflection occurs anytime the conditions for reflecting upon the state of affairs—in terms of beliefs, shared values, institutional design—are improved. That is, we claim that progress in self-reflection occurs when there is an increase in the number of sources of information and in the possibilities for exchange of opinions, both within the regime and in dialogue with external interlocutors.

The three dimensions are, to a certain extent, independent from each other, as a political regime might make progress only on one dimension while regressing, or staying still, on the others. However, the three dimensions of progress can also interact with each other in special ways, thereby giving rise to more complex and multifaceted political judgments. This can be seen by examining how self-reflection works in relation to the other two criteria of political progress.

A society's progress in terms of self-reflection can affect progress in terms of both inclusivity and responsiveness. With regard to the former, self-reflection can help refine the standards for basic security by including dimensions that

were not considered before. For example, basic security as protection from violence might be replaced by basic security as the active provision of means for survival or of means to live a flourishing life. In addition, internal critique can more closely assess whether basic security is actually being provided, by unveiling possible manipulative mechanisms on the part of the regime or ideological narratives that distort the perception of political facts, especially with reference to the actual provision of security. In these cases, elaborating political judgments about progress might entail assessing political change according to two or more interacting criteria. For example, if we cherish progress in terms of self-reflection (with respect to the values held by a given political community), we might want to further evaluate whether such progress has been followed by progress in terms of responsiveness (for instance, by looking at whether political practices have been enhanced in order to help include minorities' worldviews in a system of principles that regulate the political order).

Self-reflection can affect the dimension of responsiveness too. With regard to responsiveness, we previously argued that progress occurs whenever subjects' values other than security are enhanced. Admittedly, though, the values held within even a single community could be the most disparate. As we previously noted, disagreement about worldviews is, according to realists, an unavoidable feature of the political realm and often entails that the polity establishes political standards and ordering principles that mirror only some subjects' values. Such partiality surely results from existing trade-offs among different conceptions of what good politics is, but certainly also from existing hierarchies of power. After all, it is not difficult to imagine that the worldviews enhanced by the majority are more often realized at the expense of the needs of minorities.

Accordingly, there is progress in terms of self-reflection anytime that minorities' perspectives are taken into consideration with a committed attitude—that is, with the intention of providing them with increased responsiveness or at least of considering them eligible for increased responsiveness.[8] Admittedly, it can be the case that some measures favoring minorities cannot be implemented, for reasons other than willingness to ignore the minorities' worldviews (for example, scarcity of resources or resulting instability). Considerations of feasibility should surely play a role when assessing political changes, as a lack of progress in responsiveness toward these groups might not be due to a discriminatory political decision. For this reason, this requirement does not entail that progress occurs only if new stances are effectively implemented by the regime. Rather, progress occurs when different perspectives are taken into consideration with a committed attitude and the eventual refusal to implement them is accompanied by a justification that does not refer to an existing hierarchy of power.[9]

4 | CONCEPT AND CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL PROGRESS

In the previous section, we argued that political progress consists in an increase in at least one of the three dimensions of progress we have identified: inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection. These three dimensions constitute the core of a realist concept of progress. However, we still need to clarify how such dimensions should be employed and how they interrelate in the assessment of political changes. For this purpose, we now argue that the concept of progress must be distinguished from conceptions of progress. This allows us to explain why we conceive of the concept of progress as providing us with criteria for political judgment rather than providing defining features of ideal political regimes.

As we saw, the concept of progress is grounded on an interpretation of the function of politics as the sphere of activity that is expected to bring order, security, stability, and the terms for effective cooperation in circumstances of unresolvable and permanent disagreement while providing a justification for power that is acceptable to subjects. Relatedly, political progress is change that helps fulfill the fundamental function of politics. In this sense, the concept of progress is a functional one, for it is construed by starting from an appraisal of the function of politics as a practice. Accordingly, the three dimensions of the concept of progress are evaluative criteria for measuring whether political changes represent betterments in the fulfillment of the function of politics. By being so characterized, the concept of

progress transcends the specific political contexts under scrutiny, as it derives from an understanding of what politics is, as distinct from other spheres of human experience.

Admittedly, the concept of progress so defined cannot, by itself, say anything about the content of the values and ordering principles that would enhance progressive political changes in a specific political society (at a certain time and place). Indeed, a concept of political progress can give rise to different substantive conceptions of political progress, depending on the specific political contexts in which we employ it.

In contrast to the concept of political progress, conceptions of political progress are context sensitive, as they concern the specific values and ordering principles held in a given political society. Conceptions of progress are context sensitive in two respects. First, they are context sensitive to the extent that they determine the content of the formal criteria included in the concept of progress. For example, different societies with different cultural backgrounds might have different normative understandings of relevant notions, such as security, and of the function of politics. Such different understandings lead to different conceptions of progress, which are not to be interpreted as mere applications of a single ideal of politics to diverse political contexts. Indeed, recall that realist normativity is bottom-up: whether, and on what conditions, regimes include, or are responsive to, subjects depends upon subjects' actual beliefs. Hence, the concept of progress is unable, prior to assessing the political context under investigation, to indicate what kind of political arrangements or reforms ought to be pursued; rather, the concept of progress merely provides formal criteria according to which the substantive normative principles ought to be justified on a contextual level. In this sense, conceptions of progress normatively depend on the concept of progress only to a limited extent; more specifically, the concept provides them with the criteria for elaborating in-context substantive political judgments.

To give an example, imagine a regime (L) grounded on libertarian values and a regime (S) grounded on socialist values. In L, a conception of progress would probably entail reducing protectionist measures that conflict with the ideal of a free market. In contrast, a conception of progress in S would probably entail increasing the number of measures that strengthen the capacity of the community to provide its members with equal access to basic resources—for example, by implementing measures that protect the weakest industries.

Conceptions of progress are context-dependent also in a second sense: They provide us with an ordering—albeit provisional and contextual—of the three criteria composing the concept of progress. Indeed, conceptions of progress are not merely intended to provide contextual implementations of three criteria of political progress in light of feasibility constraints. For one thing, the purpose of the concept of progress is not to specify an ideal of politics given by the fulfillment of the three criteria of progress. Moreover, the concept of progress does not order the three criteria according to a fixed hierarchy. Therefore, conceptions of progress must not be conceived of as recipes to maximize the three criteria of progress in actual circumstances. Rather, conceptions of progress provide context-based justifications of the hierarchy and the trade-offs ordering the three criteria of progress: by formulating conceptions of progress, one examines the specific context under scrutiny, and such an understanding allows one to formulate a normative conception of progress that hierarchically orders the criteria included in the concept of progress.

Indeed, in political circumstances there can be trade-offs between two or more dimensions of the concept of progress, and these trade-offs cannot be negotiated through fixed, cross-contextual, hierarchical rules. Consider, for instance, the relation between inclusivity and responsiveness. As Williams himself recognizes, it is impossible for political regimes to provide a legitimation story acceptable for every subject: Given the inescapability of disagreement, there will always be some subjects who will perceive the political relationship as sheer domination (Williams, 2005, pp. 135–136). In our terms, it is impossible for regimes to include every subject. For this reason, inclusivity cannot always trump responsiveness. It might be the case that responsiveness toward included subjects ought to be prioritized because either it is impossible to extend the scope of inclusivity or its extension will decrease responsiveness to the point of generating political instability. The trade-off between inclusivity and responsiveness must be assessed according to the specificities of the political context examined.

Or consider the relation between self-reflection and inclusivity. As realists are keen to emphasize, the relationship between truth and politics can be troublesome (Bellamy, 2019). One of the reasons realists often give to explain the complex relationship between truth and politics is related to regimes' security: Keeping secret some information

regarding the established political authority might be necessary both to preserve regimes' internal stability and to defend them from external threats (Williams, 2005, ch. 13). In such cases, realists might argue in favor of restricting the sources of information available to subjects in order to prioritize national security. In our terminology, realists might deem it necessary to restrict self-reflection (that is, subjects' access to information) in order to advance or safeguard inclusivity (that is, the provision of basic security to the subjects). Therefore, the trade-off between self-reflection and inclusivity must be evaluated according to the political circumstances examined.

Crucially—contrary to the concept of progress, which we described as a functional concept—context-based conceptions of political progress, by being characterized as contextual interpretations of the three criteria of progress, are *evolutionary*. Conceptions of progress change according to changes in the beliefs and values held by the subjects and according to changes in the political, historical, and economic circumstances; however, beliefs cannot change in every respect or direction. In this sense, we think that Williams grasps something true when he says that once a process of reflection has begun, it is not possible to get back to a previous "unreflective" set of beliefs: Once certain claims or questions have been posed, it is impossible to simply "erase" them from history and culture.[10] Because cultural systems gradually change following the process of self-reflection, conceptions of progress, which are belief-based, change accordingly over time. Therefore, conceptions of political progress ought to be regarded as evolutionary conceptions because they gradually incorporate the outcomes of the process of self-reflection.

Having discussed how the concept and conceptions of progress relate to one another, we are now able to further clarify our understanding of the three criteria of progress as criteria for political judgment. As we have seen, the three criteria of progress do not compose a blueprint of the perfect polity. Indeed, if they did, our notion of progress would promote a universally ideal political standard, thereby violating the fundamental realist requirement according to which political normativity ought to start by appraising real politics. Further, they do not include any recipe for maximizing them. Indeed, in real political circumstances, it might be the case that there is a trade-off between two or three of the criteria and that the specificities of the political context under scrutiny require one to privilege the adoption of one criterion over another. Finally, they do not represent standards that provide guidance at the level of political practice, as they are not ordered according to a defined hierarchy. By being so characterized, the three dimensions of progress are only able to provide some formal criteria for orienting political judgment in actual contexts, rather than providing normative principles to apply in real circumstances and thereby formulating specific policies for achieving political progress. Indeed, as we showed, the assessment of political progress remains an irreducibly contextual endeavor.

5 | IS REALIST POLITICAL PROGRESS *Realist*?

At the beginning of this article, we listed a series of three challenges that every realist account of political progress must meet to prove its consistency. First, such an account must be sensitive to politics and context; that is, it must develop normative standards from an appraisal of the political circumstances. Second, it must be able to ground judgments that apply across different contexts in order to explicate why we consider some facts as unequivocal signs of political progress (we mentioned the example of the abolition of slavery). Finally, it must not be ideologically biased by prepolitically favoring one understanding of progress over another.

With regard to the first challenge, someone might object that our functional interpretation of political progress is not ultimately sensitive to politics and context for two reasons. First, because the different conceptions of progress are belief-based, they are necessarily only provisionally and partially adequate, as they depend on change over time of the corresponding beliefs. In other words, the conception of progress we apply at, for example, time T1 is based on beliefs we interpreted at time T0. This, the objection might continue, implies that the account of political progress we are defending is inevitably inconsistent because it is always partially insensitive to beliefs. Moreover, according to our account, progress would never be achievable because the progressive reforms a regime enacts can never appropriately reflect people's beliefs.

These are sound worries, but we believe they are less troublesome than they appear. This is for three reasons. First, the three dimensions of progress are based on beliefs that do not change at the same frequency. For instance, inclusivity is a fundamental level that reflects the most basic interests of subjects and, for this reason, varies less frequently than the other two dimensions. Second, the beliefs held within groups require a certain amount of time to change; therefore, conceptions of political progress can be stable. Finally, the correspondence between people's beliefs and the regime's policies is not the only condition to be satisfied in order to legitimately speak of political progress; rather, a change in the beliefs themselves might also be the result of political progress, as it constitutes progress along the dimension of self-reflection.

Still, the worry points to something correct: Because the concept is functional, the theorist is always required to investigate reality and its changes,[11] as we showed when discussing how political progress ought to be evaluated. Admittedly, the conception of political progress is inevitably a "late" conception, precisely because it is fact dependent rather than independently and externally articulated.[12] The "delay" of the notion also entails that we might need to distinguish between the enactment of a progressive reform and its success; more specifically, a positive evaluation of the reform—that is, its progressive aim—may be accompanied by a negative assessment of the outcomes in political practice. In other words, a reform could be progressive in its intention but could ultimately fail to fulfill its purpose.

However, the objector might reply with an opposite worry: If a realist conception of political progress was context sensitive, it might be unable to provide general rules for guiding action because every circumstance would require an independent assessment.[13] This concern recalls the second fundamental challenge a realist account of political progress must rebut. The objection might run as follows. An account of progress must provide a universal system of evaluation that allows us to compare and assess changes; therefore, a context-sensitive methodology cannot ground a sound account of political progress. This must be so—the objection goes—because without a context-independent system of evaluation, every comparison would become meaningless, as criteria of assessment would change along with the context.

However, our analysis allows us to show that the concern about the impossibility of cross-contextual assessments of political changes is partly misplaced. The difference between concept and conceptions of progress helps to assuage this concern. Recall that we defined the concept of progress as a functional one: The three criteria of progress define the conditions according to which a political change contributes toward realizing the function of politics as a practice. In fact, the concept of progress, as distinct from its related conceptions, allows us to draw the lines along which to critically approach different political contexts. That a political regime stops being in a relationship of domination with its subjects and enters into a political relationship counts as political progress independently of the specific features of the different political contexts. It is so because inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection represent those aspects that are, by definition, inherent to what politics, as opposed to raw domination, is. Put differently, given that the concept of political progress that we propose is built upon a functional interpretation of politics as a practice, it offers itself as a tool to evaluate progress in every political circumstance. Unlike the concept of progress, context-based conceptions of political progress are evolutionary. So although the concept of progress allows one to articulate a political judgment that crosses different political contexts, conceptions of progress ensure the context sensitivity of specific political judgments, thereby fulfilling the realist requirement of linking political normativity to the characteristics of the political practice. Hence, consistently with realism's theoretical commitments, standards for progress must be construed starting from subjects' own understanding of political relationships. However, such standards are still to be inscribed within the boundaries of the concept of progress. Therefore, our account does provide a standard to track political improvements across time and space. Indeed, political conceptions are progressive insofar as they evolve and provide a better understanding of the contextual standards that fulfill the function of politics; and political changes are progressive insofar as they contribute to an increasingly better fulfillment of the function of politics.

Finally, we come to the ideology-critique problem. Does any attempt at proposing an account of political progress without engaging in a preliminary critique of ideologies violate the realist requirement of taking seriously the problem of false consciousness? We think not. In fact, as we explained, our account of political progress incorporates a concern about ideology critique. It does so on two levels. First, a conception of political progress can be revised either because

the beliefs that inform the conception do not pass Williams's CTP or because the mechanism of socially enforced self-reflection (the third dimension of political progress) allows people to actively engage in a process of ideology critique, thereby changing their own beliefs. Second, as self-reflection can also affect our understanding of the function of politics, and that understanding grounds our concept of political progress, the concept itself is subject to revision. In this sense, both the concept and the conceptions of political progress are far from being uncritical and static, as they are continuously revisable in light of the outcomes of ideology critique.[14] In our account, what are taken to be normatively valid prescriptions are always provisionally valid prescriptions; then, rather than being mutually exclusive, substantive normative theories and ideology critique represent two fundamental and complementary parts of a single normative inquiry.

6 | REALIST POLITICAL PROGRESS AND LEGITIMACY

In elaborating our proposal, we borrowed some notions from Williams's account of legitimacy. This might raise the concern that our notion of political progress either depends on or aims at clarifying a notion of political legitimacy. Although these two concepts are intimately linked—because they both are grounded, at least in a realist theoretical framework, on an interpretation of the function of political practice—we do not necessarily conceive of political progress as a progression toward legitimacy. Still, our notion of progress, as a standard independent from legitimacy, can help one assess when progress along the dimension of legitimacy has been achieved even though standards of legitimacy are not satisfied. To further clarify our position, consider the following three examples.

Williams argues that a regime is legitimate when it fulfills the requirements included in the BLD. Legitimacy, in his account, is still a scalar notion because each requirement of the BLD can be fulfilled to a different extent. Consider the case of two regimes, R1 and R2. Both are totalitarian regimes, which do not meet the BLD requirements. However, R1 enacts reforms that increase inclusivity, although not fulfilling entirely the requirements of the BLD. R2, instead, enacts reforms that turn the regime into a legitimate one by fulfilling the standards of the BLD. Thus, R2, according to Williams's understanding, is now a legitimate regime, whereas R1 is not. In both cases, though, we can plausibly say that progress has been made.

Imagine now two different regimes, R3 and R4. They both fulfill the requirements of the BLD; therefore, they are both legitimate according to Williams's understanding. Over time, R3 makes progress in terms of responsiveness to the values held by the majority, whereas R4 makes progress in terms of self-reflection and, subsequently, in terms of responsiveness to the values held by the minority. R4, according to our understanding of progress, makes more progress because progress is made along two dimensions (self-reflection and responsiveness) instead of only one. This example shows that our notion of progress helps grasp differences in legitimacy that are not captured by Williams's categories. In fact, although Williams admits that legitimacy is a scalar concept, his normative tools do not help us compare progress in the legitimacy of two regimes that meet the requirements of the BLD.

Finally, imagine regimes R5 and R6, both of which are legitimate and claim to be just regimes. However, R5 implemented justice in a way that does not reflect subjects' conception of justice, whereas R6 implemented justice according to subjects' conception. We can plausibly conclude that R6 made more progress than R5 because it better enhanced the idea that the political order should mirror subjects' values and worldviews.

In sum, these examples show that our notion of progress can be used as a tool to investigate changes in legitimacy; that is, it can help us understand whether changes enacted by the political authority represent progressive stances in terms of the regime's legitimacy, even though those regimes might be far from reaching acceptable standards.[15] Indeed, our notion of progress cannot be reduced to notions of justice or legitimacy—whether elaborated according to a realist or a moralist approach. It thereby tracks improvements in political circumstances in which those standards are not satisfied.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we elaborated a realist notion of political progress. We began by exposing the main commitment of a realist approach to political theory and the related challenges that a notion of political progress faces. In particular, we argued that a notion of political progress needs to balance the need for context sensitivity with the need for providing normative guidance.

We thus elaborated the concept of political progress as consisting in progress on three different dimensions—inclusivity, responsiveness, and self-reflection—and argued that the concept is then implemented according to different conceptions. The conceptions of progress incorporate the specific values held in a given political community, whereas the three dimensions of the concept of progress represent evaluative criteria that allow for cross-cutting political judgments.

Finally, we argued that realist political progress successfully meets the requirements for a realist notion of progress and secures a critical stand toward the status quo. In addition, it is particularly suitable to track progressive changes in societies that do not meet the requirements of justice and legitimacy, and it is sensitive to the specificities of different cultural, historical, and political contexts.

NOTES

[1] Accusations of conservatism have been made against realists from different camps of the political theory spectrum. For a discussion of the relationship between realism and conservatism, see Finlayson (2017). A more substantive proposal arguing for the anticonservatist attitude of political realism has been offered by Rossi (2019) and Raekstad (2018). On the debate about the possibility of consistently elaborating a realist distinctive normativity, see Erman and Möller (2015), Jubb and Rossi (2015), Jubb (2019), and Leader Maynard and Worsnip (2018).

[2] Weber (2004) famously coined the expression "ethic of responsibility" to indicate the normative prescriptions applied to the genuine politician: Politics being the sphere of power and coercion, politicians should envisage political actions by taking into consideration the consequences of using coercion as the ultimate legitimate means.

[3] For a critical discussion of such a standpoint, see Roth (2012).

[4] For instance, Raymond Geuss regards criticism of false ideologies as a fundamental task of political theorizing. Geuss's works are characterized as being paradigmatic examples of nonconstructive criticisms—that is, as attempts to unveil false beliefs, where the attempts do not necessarily aspire to define which alternative beliefs we should regard as true. See, for example, Geuss (2001, 2016). In this sense, the criticisms directed against Geuss's works for their failure to provide a constructive theory of political normativity (Hurka, 2009) must be regarded as misinterpretations of his approach (on this point, see Geuss, 2014, pp. 68–90).

[5] See, for example, Allen (2016).

[6] Nonetheless, our notion should not be read as a Williamsian interpretation of political progress. Rather, we aim at a notion that is more broadly compatible with the main commitments shared by contemporary realist scholars, as presented in section 2.

[7] Rossi (2019) distinguishes between three types of realism: "ordorealism," "contextual realism," and "radical realism." Though they place emphasis on different aspects of politics—respectively order, political contexts, and vindicatory genealogy—they all share the same conception of politics as a sphere distinct from the moral one, and, hence, they all commit themselves to antimoralism. Similarly, Favara (2021) shows how the different camps in the realist literature have as a common denominator a shared conception of the traits of politics.

[8] Importantly, progress in terms of self-reflection can be appreciated both by looking at the regime's performance and the subjects' action and, to a certain extent, by comparing the regime's and subjects' efforts. For example, imagine a political order in which the majority (group A) supports a political view that ignores, or even denies, the needs of a minority (group B). Imagine also that the regime lacks responsiveness toward group B while being responsive toward group A, for this enhances its popularity. An effort by group A to consider group B's stances (self-reflection) might increase the overall level of responsiveness because group A's inclusion of the stances of group B can increase the chances of group B's claims

being considered by the regime. Relatedly, when such an effort by group A is not followed by an increase in the regime's responsiveness toward group B, the lack of progress can be uniquely imputed to the political authority.

9   Notice that self-reflection neither aims at eliminating or hiding disagreement nor reintroduces moralism through the back-door. It does not eliminate disagreement because it does not prescribe that a shared view must be found at any cost. Rather, it prescribes listening to minorities' reasons and reflecting upon them with a committed attitude. In addition, self-reflection does not implicitly rely on a moral principle, such as equality, when treating political progress as consideration of minorities' perspectives. Rather, such a treatment derives from the fact that politics is different from raw domination. Williams (2005) himself discusses this point: "The fact that everywhere there is a legitimation story to be told to each citizen does not imply, of course, that in terms of the story there is some presumption that citizens should be treated equally" (p. 95). Rather, a justification must be provided because when power is exercised without justification, the political authority is not in a political relationship with its subjects, but rather in a relationship of domination (Hall, 2017).

10   Williams (2002, p. 254) claims: "This is the intellectual irreversibility of Enlightenment. Of course, it is only its intellectual irreversibility, and there are only too many ways in which Enlightenment may be reversed in historical fact, given a substantial enough political or natural catastrophe." See also Nussbaum (2007, p. 940).

11   Although we develop criteria for assessing political progress, we do not address the issue of what perspective these criteria should be employed from—that is, whether the theorist should apply them to elaborate a political judgment that only expresses the internal perspective, or whether the theorist should rather be influenced by external perspectives that elaborate political judgments according to the criteria individuated here. Addressing this question is beyond the scope of this article, although it is surely a related inquiry. For discussion of whether political realism can develop a critique that is not purely internalist, we refer to the growing debate in the realist literature on the role of the theorist (for example, Cozzaglio, 2021; Favara, 2021).

12   As explained earlier, the three criteria of progress stem from an understanding of the facts of politics: the inevitability of conflict, the use of coercion as a last resort, and the distinction between a political relationship and a relationship of domination. Conceptions of progress are fact-dependent because they are normative criteria that stem from an appraisal of the facts that characterize the specific political community under scrutiny. In this case, the relevant facts that affect the elaboration of normative conceptions of progress are both the political, historical, cultural, and economic circumstances that characterize that community and the value system held by subjects living in that community.

13   Notice, however, that our analysis does not directly deal with the issue of action guidance—that is, which policies would enhance political progress in specific circumstances. This issue would represent another dimension of a theory of political progress that we do not presently examine, namely, the one that connects the theoretical level of analysis to the policy-making one.

14   Importantly, this also rebuts the critique that our concept of progress represents a universalistic ideal that stands as the touchstone for elaborating political normativity.

15   One might wonder why we separate inclusivity from Williams's CTP. In fact, the objection might go, for Williams the CTP is one of the tools that help discriminate between a political relationship and a relationship of domination; instead, by separating the dimensions of inclusivity and self-reflection, we seem to lose a relevant aspect of Williams's notion. We think the objection is misplaced for the following reason. As we explained earlier, self-reflection can impact the notion of inclusivity. In this sense, there is progress when self-reflection unveils a deficient or distorted conception of inclusivity. In this case, self-reflection operates on inclusivity in the same way in which the CTP operates on Williams's solution to the first political question. Separating the two requirements of inclusivity and self-reflection is functional toward appreciating the different degrees to which a certain notion of inclusivity can be unsatisfactory. Self-reflection as applied to inclusivity can reveal that the notion of inclusivity held in a certain political community is unsatisfactory, although not distortive or manipulative. Similarly, it can shed light on cases in which inclusivity has genuinely increased with regard to some groups, although other groups within the same political community remain excluded for reasons that contravene the CTP.

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