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THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS IN PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE UNITED STATES (1929–1935)

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INTRODUCTION

The study of history can be undertaken from multiple philosophical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Underlying this diversity is a fundamental question: the nature of the object of study and the discipline that addresses it, both conditioned by spatiotemporal dimensions. In this article, we examine a historically significant scenario: the United States during the Great Depression and the first New Deal.

Our study addresses cultural debates within US historiography, linked to political positions and traditions, as well as to the construction of political consensus and legitimacy. Historically, the idea of progress has been central to US political culture and to society at large. The period we explore witnessed a profound transformation of the country. Hence, we expect to observe a redefinition of the concept of progress consistent with the dynamics of the time.

We focus on presidential political discourse in this period. This choice is motivated by its importance as a tool in the production of legitimacy, particularly in contexts of structural crisis and deep reconfiguration. We do not intend to assess the veracity of this discourse or to identify the true beliefs of the presidents. Ultimately, these factors are secondary to its public impact and to the ways in which it helps shape perceptions and behaviors.

A basic premise of this article is that the concept of progress, as articulated in political discourse, is not a universal category. Rather, it is a historically and contextually conditioned construct. As such, it operates within dynamic networks of relations defined by specific distributions of power. In the United States, this context has been shaped by complex systems of inequality, structured around cleavages rooted in class, race, ethnicity, wealth, religion, gender, and more.

Additionally, when we refer to political consensus, we do not intend to denote any—likely impossible—form of homogeneous perception, ideological preference, or behavior. We understand it as a dominant core of ideas, implicitly or explicitly accepted by the majority of a population and interpreted by individuals and groups according to their concrete material conditions, within a relatively narrow range of variation. Segments of the population fall outside that range, but they are not sufficient to destabilize the system.

The idea of progress in history has been addressed by several authors. Among the classic contributions are John Bagnell Bury (1972), who examined it as a philosophical problem from antiquity to the nineteenth century; Frederick J. Teggart (1949), who studied the relationship between progress and historical process from the seventeenth century to the first half of the twentieth century; and Robert Nisbet (1981), who understood progress as the backdrop of human history and the guiding thread of modernity.

Progress in the history of the United States has been primarily addressed by Edward McNall Burns (1973) and David W. Marcell (1974). The former identified concepts such as messianism, exceptionalism, and progress as cornerstones of American nation-building and as foundations of its international projection. The latter demonstrated that the concept of progress is vital to modern American society.

These works outline the general framework of the function of the idea of progress as one of the axes of modernity and as a central component in the formation and development of the United States. As such, it recurs in American political discourse and operates as a metanarrative of the American Dream. However, our review did not identify studies on the evolution of the concept of progress as it has been used in political discourse, particularly by presidents. This article aims to complement these classical studies by pursuing this line of inquiry.

The presidential nature of the American political model grants the head of state a central role in constructing the legitimacy necessary for the ongoing reproduction of the social order (Pfiffner). Presidential discourse is essential as a channel for communication, mobilization, and—when necessary or desired—the justification and promotion of policy adjustments. The concept of progress carries significant legitimizing potential for diverse political projects, as it articulates aspirations and opportunities.

Our study addresses two questions: were there different definitions of progress in presidential discourse during the period 1929–1935?

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How can this variation be explained? We approach this study through the theoretical model of evolutionary history developed by Domínguez López (2025), drawing on works on evolutionary mechanisms by Stuart-Fox (1999) and Runciman (2009), as well as on Braudel's theory of historical time (60–106).

To examine the concept of progress, we apply methods from conceptual history: semantic and onomasiological (Koselleck 31–33). The former allows us to explore the different meanings of a concept over time, revealing a multiplicity of meanings corresponding to a changing reality. The latter examines the various signifiers through which the concept is expressed, asking how it is articulated and directing attention to the diverse terms used to express the "state of affairs" that constitutes it.

The bulk of the corpus consists of key presidential speeches: inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses (annual addresses), and farewell addresses. These speeches encompass the presentation of government programs and the ideological assumptions upon which they are built, analyses of the prevailing situation, the fulfillment of plans and promises, updates to government agendas, and general assessments of performance and identified challenges. Several additional speeches, considered relevant to the topic, are also included.[1]

The selected period represents the deepest crisis experienced by the United States since the end of the Civil War. It encompasses the presidency of Herbert Hoover and the first two years of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). The latter coincides with the first New Deal, when Roosevelt launched his initial program to address the Great Depression and reorganize American society.

PROGRESS AND PROGRESSIVISM

The modern use of "progress" as a key concept in presidential discourse began with the emergence of progressivism. This movement arose in the wake of the profound transformations of the late nineteenth century: accelerated industrialization, territorial expansion, the rise of the modern corporation, mass immigration, and relative agricultural decline (Whitten and Whitten). Contradictions, social conflicts, and political movements (Taggart 25–45; Hackney), along with the economic crisis of the 1890s (Davis and Cull 733–812), opened

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all speeches (both while in office and during election campaigns) are drawn from The American Presidency Project, a research resource based at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In the text, we refer to the type and year of these speeches.

space for this new project, which became associated with the presidencies of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, and whose lasting effects extended through the presidencies of William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge. Notably, it drew primarily from white farmers and working-class sectors.

Progressives formulated a definition of progress in which, in addition to advancement to a higher stage of development, life and property were considered sacred rights of both the people and the nation. As Theodore Roosevelt stated in 1910, "[t]he Republic would mean nothing without a 'true democracy,' an 'economic system under which every man [has] the opportunity to manifest the best that exists within him'" (Roosevelt 273). The two decades between the end of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency (1909) and the onset of the crisis in 1929 constitute an important period that still requires further investigation. According to Neil Wynn, it is often divided into distinct phases: the prewar years—an era of activism, idealism, and reform—and the 1920s, a time of materialism, conservatism, and disconnection (xxv).

We adopt a different perspective. The continuity of the operational models of the cultural complex during those years, beyond normal fluctuations, indicates a period of relative stability—a conjuncture generated by the transition that unfolded at the turn of the century and extended until the end of the 1920s. This period was characterized by a trend toward economic growth and a return to conservatism fused with key components of progressivism. Forms of control over corporations were maintained, while a relatively free play of market forces was promoted. Personal prosperity was understood as a right, achieved through competition and maximized individual freedom, while racial hierarchies were preserved.

The postwar recession (1920–1921) was overcome in macroeconomic terms without significant structural change. At the same time, highly speculative financial markets expanded as increasing numbers of people invested in them (Faulkner 719). The belief that growth in individually owned wealth was central to progress, and that "everyone" could access the opportunities to achieve it, took hold during this period. Banks extended massive loans to support this dynamic and the Federal Reserve maintained relatively low interest rates (Rothbard 169–80).

HOOVER AND THE CRISIS

The crisis of the 1930s, a major historical turning point, is conventionally considered to have begun in October 1929. It has been extensively studied (Rothbard 1975; Bernstein 1987; Bernanke 2000;

McNeese 2010; Galbraith 1955). Evidence indicates that the stock market crash acted as a trigger for the eruption of accumulated instability. The collapse of economic indicators was only part of the problem; it was compounded by the inadequacy of the prevailing theoretical frameworks of the time to address it, the instability affecting large segments of the population—especially the loss of social mobility (Gordon 25–328)—and the unsustainability of previous political projects.[2] In other words, it was a structural crisis that revealed the exhaustion of the operational models that had defined the historical conjuncture and the loss of their capacity to reproduce the cultural complex.

Thus, the contradictions that gave rise to it had developed earlier. Agriculture had stagnated (Galbraith 1955), becoming subordinated to manufacturing. The latter also had its weaknesses, the most obvious being that increased profits were accompanied by stagnant wages. This imbalance, in the absence of redistributive public policies or social safety nets, limited the expansion of effective demand and, therefore, the market (Clark 106).

Stock market speculation introduced a considerable degree of instability into this mix. By September 1929, the market value of traded securities had increased significantly. Meanwhile, the two mainstays of the American economy—the steel and automotive industries—were beginning to contract (Rostow 220). This decoupling both generated and masked instability. Combined with the stagnation of agriculture and the inelasticity of aggregate demand, the crisis became inevitable. The stock market crash of 1929 was the result of accumulated contradictions that overwhelmed the capacity of the economic model to manage them.

Herbert Hoover took office in March 1929. He had been one of the leading proponents of the economic policies of the 1920s. From 1921 to 1923, he led a research committee that established what was known as a "typical business cycle"; its findings indicated that market forces restored equilibrium on their own after a crisis (Committee of the President's Conference on Unemployment and a Special Staff of the National Bureau). In 1922, he published *American Individualism* (Hoover 1922), in which he defended what he considered the foundations of the nation. Concurrently, he served as Secretary of Commerce during the Harding and Coolidge administrations and gained renown for his lectures on trade (Foner 188–208).

2 If we broaden the scope of the study, we find processes of similar—if not greater—magnitude in other historical contexts, including the rise of Nazism in Germany. See Polanyi.

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Hoover belonged to a generation of intellectuals, politicians, and businesspeople who championed classical liberalism in its earlier forms.[3] As such, his works and speeches condensed a line of thought widely held among the country's elites before the crisis (Galbraith 720–25), drawing on the ideas of Adam Smith (1965) and Alfred Marshall (1920). His liberalism was expressed through three axioms: supply creates its own demand; factors that contribute to increased supply also contribute to economic growth; and the market should be regulated by individual interests (Rothbard 185–208).

In his inaugural address, Hoover articulated a view according to which, in addition to contributing to global recovery and progress after the Great War and restoring confidence in democracy, the country had, domestically, achieved the following:

> […] a higher degree of comfort and security than ever existed before in the history of the world. Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before. The devotion to and concern for our institutions are deep and sincere. We are steadily building a new race—a new civilization great in its own attainments. The influence and high purposes of our Nation are respected among the peoples of the world. We aspire to distinction in the world, but to a distinction based upon confidence in our sense of justice as well as our accomplishments within our own borders and in our own lives. (*Inaugural Address* 1929)

Hoover's reaction to the outbreak of the crisis months later was consistent with these principles. Convinced that the 1929 crash was a typical cyclical crisis, he asserted that the country would emerge from it by allowing market forces to follow their course (Annual Address 1930, 1931, and 1932). He identified himself as an heir to progressivism; however, it is evident that he differed from earlier progressives regarding the role of the state in the economy. In his second annual address, he argued that economic problems should be resolved through the autonomous operation of the economy, driven by the actions of producers and consumers rather than by government intervention. Cooperation, he maintained, should be based on each individual preserving "self-sufficiency" and seeking "methods to improve their business or service" (Annual Address 1930).

3 It should not be confused with the form of liberalism redefined in the United States during the postwar period, which more closely resembles contemporary European social democracy.

Despite this, Hoover implemented several measures, primarily targeting supply-side issues. In 1930, he held meetings with the leaders of major companies and with state governments, seeking agreements to maintain business activity and wages. He asked Congress to lower taxes, created the Federal Agricultural Board to counteract falling prices, and established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to provide guaranteed loans to banks, lending associations, insurance and mortgage companies, agricultural and livestock credit associations, and railroads. Efforts to sustain demand were much more limited, including the Home Loan Act, which expanded emergency loans to homeowners, and a public works program that he was unable to complete due to the banking collapse (Faulkner 726–28). Hence, in the absence of compensatory mechanisms, the impact of the crisis was deeply asymmetric, affecting different racial groups and social classes in markedly unequal ways.

Hoover's basic position did not change. As late as 1932, he stated:

> On the social and economic sides, the background of our American system and the motivation of progress is essentially that we should allow free play of social and economic forces as far as will not limit equality of opportunity and as will at the same time stimulate the initiative and enterprise of our people. (Annual Address 1932)

Hoover's discourse placed particular emphasis on economic growth, which the state should not hinder through its actions, given the centrality of individual liberty. Thus, redistribution and social security were not part of his policy framework. This position appeared to be confirmed by the economic boom of the mid-1920s. The recession of 1920–1921 was seen as a brief interruption from which the economy had quickly recovered (Gordon 25–328).

The president's concept of well-being—a signifier of progress was understood as fundamentally individual. Collective well-being was conceived as the aggregate of individual well-being. This perspective reduced well-being to personal achievement and rejected the role of the state as a provider. Consequently, his concept of progress was defined as the attainment and maintenance of economic growth, individual freedom, the expansion of individual wealth, and the formal possibility of universal access to the opportunities required to achieve it (Inaugural Address 1929; Annual Address 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932). This was a classical liberal perspective, aligned with the symbolic core and dominant consensus of the pre-crisis configuration of American capitalism. Hoover's definition of progress was articulated through several key signifiers: individual freedom, (formal) equality of opportunity, the guarantee of minimum conditions of life, and the need for security.

The discourse and policies produced by the administration during the crisis reflected this logic. They expressed unwavering faith in the market's natural tendency toward stability and, therefore, in its intrinsic capacity for recovery without external assistance. They also reflected the interests of corporate sectors that favored low levels of regulation, state elites seeking to maintain as much autonomy as possible, staunch isolationists, and other groups within the American political and social spectrum. In other words, this approach coincided with that of the forces that dominated the political landscape of the 1910s and 1920s (Clements 2010; Wilson 1975). The evident disconnect from reality indicates the exhaustion of this model of thought in the context of a structural crisis and, consequently, the fracture of the consensus.

Hoover's definition of progress was built on individual freedom, self-sufficiency, and formal equality of opportunity. It operated within a framework that ignored race, gender, and class, and thus overlooked the fundamental inequalities in American society. Consequently, it did not challenge the existing social hierarchy. In practice, the African American population, particularly in the South, was effectively excluded from this definition, and legal segregation was never addressed. It was formally inclusive but materially exclusive.

The disconnection between discourse and reality revealed the exhaustion of dominant modes of thought, as part of a broader exhaustion of the models of reproduction that led to the structural crisis. This, in turn, fractured the consensus, driving a wedge between elites and the masses and triggering a broader reconfiguration of the political structure, along with the emergence of a new dominant discourse.

FDR, THE NEW DEAL, AND THE REDEFINITION OF PROGRESS

Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency in March 1933, facing the challenge of leading the country out of the crisis. He was a veteran politician with extensive experience in the workings of Washington and the complexities of American politics. He demonstrated a clear understanding of the breakdown of consensus and the ineffectiveness of prevailing methods.

He enjoyed the support of broad segments of a heterogeneous electorate that included, among others, the traditional Southern base of the Democratic Party, Midwestern factory workers hit by the Depression, farmers on both sides of the old Mason–Dixon Line who had been left behind by the economic development of the preceding years, and the urban poor, including some traditional Republican voters (Robinson 1970; Simpson 18; Savage 103). Subsequent developments showed that he also enjoyed the support of a significant portion of the intelligentsia, particularly younger generations of academics.

During his election campaign, FDR proposed radical changes, grounded in the identification of key issues, such as the necessary regulatory function of the state and the importance of the common citizen, excluded from prosperity and severely affected by the crisis (Ryan 40–43; Roosevelt 664; Flynn 122). He promised millions of impoverished families that progress would return through a bottom-up approach, rather than the top-down model associated with Hoover ("The Forgotten Man Speech" 1932). Responsibility, he argued, had to rest with the state, and priority would shift to the working class rather than to business interests; the slogan "save the banks" gave way to "the forgotten man" (Foner 850–53). He stated:

> I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people. (Acceptance Speech 1932)

In other words, he offered a profound reorganization of the country rather than a simple change of government.

These proposals, along with the identification of the "forgotten man" as the archetypal target of his discourse, were deeply intertwined with the realities of the crisis ravaging the country, while also responding to significant political developments stemming from the fracture of the dominant consensus. There is strong evidence for this, particularly in the emergence of a wave of populism in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Taggart 38).

There were two major populist movements during those years. Huey Long, a Democratic politician from Louisiana who served as governor and later as a US senator until his assassination in 1935, mobilized a coalition that included Ku Klux Klan members and sympathizers, Catholics, and impoverished farmers with deep roots in the traditional South. His platform combined wealth redistribution, the rejection of Wall Street, pro-education campaigns, and infrastructure development, alongside racism and segregation (Piper 2010; Armenta et al. 1994; Heppen 2010; Temin 2008; Foner 874–75).

The second was the movement led by the "radio priest" Charles Coughlin, who was among the first to recognize the usefulness of mass media in advancing political projects (Warren 1996), a method also

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employed by FDR. Coughlin and his National Union for Social Justice promoted monetary reform, the nationalization of railroads and key industries, and the strengthening of labor rights, while at the same time supporting Fascist and Nazi leaders and employing a strongly antisemitic discourse (Foner 874–75). This movement was associated with Northeastern and Midwestern working- and middle-class sectors, including a large proportion of immigrants and second-generation Americans of European descent.

Hence, FDR's candidacy and discourse were conditioned in part by the existence of strong demands for change, emerging from the erosion of the social status and living conditions of broad segments of the population. These developments mobilized sectors of the white working class, middle class, and farming communities, while simultaneously excluding other groups, particularly African Americans. The election highlighted a clash between two projects, each presented as a path to progress: on the one hand, laissez-faire and individualism, tempered by limited social policies; on the other, state intervention and demand management. Society opted for change to overcome the economic depression, though not without resistance and reluctance, as evidenced by the 15,760,425 votes cast for Hoover.

FDR's response to the crisis took the form of the New Deal. This program—and the period it named—has been extensively studied from various perspectives.[4] More relevant to our purposes, however, is the origin of the ideas that shaped it. An initial approach suggests a connection with the ideas associated with John Maynard Keynes. However, John Kenneth Galbraith argues that Keynes's views do not appear to have directly influenced the initial formulation of New Deal policies (299–310).

Keynes visited the United States in 1934 to meet with FDR, though little is known about the substance of their conversation. Galbraith further suggests that Roosevelt was not particularly receptive to Keynes's ideas (302). The debate that took place more than a decade later at Bretton Woods (1944), concerning the postwar monetary and financial architecture (Steil 2013), reveals some of the fundamental differences between their respective positions.[5]

4 For example, Levine (1988) and Katznelson (2013).

5 For a detailed account of the Bretton Woods negotiations and the theoretical divergences between John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White, see Steil. While this debate highlights important differences between Keynesian proposals and American policy preferences, a full analysis lies beyond the scope of this article.

Of greater importance was the role played by the so-called Brain Trust in shaping the program—a group of political advisors assembled for the 1932 election campaign. These included lawyers, economists, university professors, and politicians whom Roosevelt consulted unofficially on specific issues. Among its most prominent members were Raymond Moley, Rexford Tugwell, and Samuel Rosenman, later joined by Adolf A. Berle, Joseph D. McGoldrick, and Hugh S. Johnson (Roosevelt 66–67).

As Galbraith notes,

> … two key Washington officials, Marriner Eccles, the highly competent banker from Utah, who would go on to become head of the Federal Reserve Board, and Lauchlin Currie, a recent Harvard professor who was Keynes's deputy director of research and later Roosevelt's economic advisor (and, still later, a prominent victim of McCarthy's persecution), had independently arrived at similar conclusions to Keynes's regarding the appropriate direction of fiscal policy. When the General Theory appeared, they both interpreted it as confirmation of the direction they had proposed. (Galbraith 302)

Adolf A. Berle had been developing his own study of the role of the state in the economy since the 1920s. In collaboration with Gardiner C. Means, his research—focused on the 200 largest companies in the United States—concluded that state regulation was the most effective means of controlling abuses by large corporations (Berle and Means 1933).

The evidence indicates that FDR aligned himself with a segment of the American intellectual elite that interpreted the 1929 crisis as the exhaustion of classical economic liberalism and recognized the need to develop policies responsive to new conditions. This perspective stood in open contradiction to that of intellectuals committed to the preceding consensus, of whom Hoover was the clearest example.

According to Harold U. Faulkner, "A major crisis, whether economic or political, usually accelerates changes in a society that has never been static and forces the acceptance of new points of view and long-overdue reforms" (712). The crisis of 1929 was a case in point. On the one hand, it catalyzed a shift in mentality; on the other, it prompted FDR to articulate a rhetoric that expressed a clear intention to bring about change. His campaign rhetoric and his speeches from the White House aligned with progressivism in several ways: he appealed to inherited values and to the well-being of citizens, and employed powerful terms such as unity, action, change, and sacrifice (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934, 1935). This inheritance was also evident when he criticized the "old political guard" for defending only the interests

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of the country's most powerful corporations (Annual Address 1934, 1935), describing them as a self-seeking generation lacking vision and upholding a "worn-out tradition" (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934). Later, when accused of being a "communist" or "socialist" for promoting state intervention, FDR responded by invoking the country's progressive tradition (Annual Address 1936, 1937).

Yet his discourse was even more radical, asserting that progress could be achieved only if social value were placed above monetary gain (Annual Address 1934, 1935). Beyond the immediate assertion of the supremacy of the moral over the economic, this vision reversed the terms of the relationship between the collective and the individual, emphasizing the social interest as a whole. The difference from earlier progressivism was further reinforced by the scope of his proposals, the existence of a defined theoretical framework, and the development of formal instruments, largely derived from the ideas and work of the Brain Trust.

Despite opposition from the Supreme Court during his first term, FDR found support in Congress—controlled by Democrats after the 1932 election—for the passage of a series of laws, concentrated in the first hundred days of his presidency and targeting the country's main problems, and complemented by executive policies that implemented and reinforced them. Among the most important pieces of legislation were the Glass-Steagall Banking Act (1933) and the Muscle Shoals Act (1933). The latter is known for creating the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which became widely recognized for generating employment and managing the nation's natural resources through a state-led corporate structure that financed and promoted cooperatives in economically depressed areas.[6]

The Roosevelt administration paid particular attention to the problem of employment, especially during its early years, when unemployment was at its peak. FDR linked this issue to the population's responsibility to the state and to the moral fabric of the nation (Inaugural Address 1933; Annual Address 1934, 1935). Furthermore, the "forgotten man" remained central to his discourse, reflected in his advocacy for farmers, workers, and other sectors vulnerable to economic collapse (Annual Address 1933, 1935). This is also evident in the pressure placed on employers to maintain wages and avoid layoffs. In his rhetoric, economic growth was accompanied by an increase in workers' purchasing power—two factors he considered interdependent (Annual Address 1934, 1935).

6 For a critique of those policies, see Brinkley (133–144).

The redefinition of progress implemented by FDR assigned a central role to the state and emphasized collective welfare. However, it did not entail a complete rejection of social inequality. In particular, his discourse made little or no reference to racial inequality. Regardless of Roosevelt's intentions—which, as noted earlier, fall outside the scope of this study—his discourse primarily addressed white audiences, especially working- and middle-class Americans identified as the "common man." Although New Deal policies did improve conditions for African Americans to some extent, they were not explicitly included in the discourse. Thus, the apparent universality of that discourse ultimately preserved the racial hierarchy.

FINAL IDEAS: INTERPRETING SHIFTING MEANINGS

The evolution of American society prior to 1929 produced a definition of progress based on the synthesis of the progressive project with economic and political liberalism. Within this framework, economic growth was the primary objective, coupled with individual liberty. This implied that the democratic and liberal state was responsible for guaranteeing the legal framework and justice without interfering in economic and social management. With its various nuances, this definition formed an integral part of the political consensus at the core of the American cultural complex before the crisis.

The pre-crisis definition of progress became disconnected from reality, acting as a centrifugal force on the political consensus. It is significant that the definition articulated by Hoover remained essentially unchanged during his years in the White House. Presidential discourse thus reveals the inability of dominant epistemic constructs in the period leading up to the crisis to adequately interpret the situation and generate viable responses. In Koselleck's terms, the concept retained its meaning while distancing itself from a transformed state of affairs. In other words, the symbolic dimension of the crisis of the 1930s was expressed, among other ways, through the disconnect between lived reality and the conceptual frameworks employed by the administration. FDR and the New Deal emerged as an alternative. As such, they had to address, among other things, two key challenges: consolidating a framework for their government program and building the legitimacy necessary to achieve the consensus required to stabilize the country.

The same fluidity is evident in the various nuances introduced into the definition of progress, particularly in the role assigned to the state in its promotion and/or guarantee. This reflects the provisional nature of both the definition itself and the political program and conceptual

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apparatus employed by the president and his administration, as well as the compromises inherent in that process.

The definition of progress absorbed influences from the work of intellectuals who questioned the viability of free trade and its political implications, while also drawing on elements of earlier progressivism. Furthermore, it incorporated into its semantic structure the demands generated by accumulated structural changes and the rupture produced by the crisis. As a result, it assumed a more inclusive character, grounded in a collective concern for guaranteeing the security of citizens through their conscious participation and the managerial role of the state. This transformation entailed a redefinition of both the signifiers and the semantic core of progress.

We thus observe two clearly distinct proposals: the residual core of the previous configuration and an alternative vision of what that configuration should become. The former was overwhelmed by the transition; the latter was shaped to manage it. In this context, the concept of progress transformed its meaning as texts and contexts were integrated into an evolving construct responsive to a changing reality.

The concept of progress thus functioned both as a tool of political legitimation and as a contested normative horizon. However, its apparent—and perhaps intended—inclusiveness remained in tension with an array of cleavages embedded in the social hierarchy that were largely left unaddressed, foremost among them racial divisions. Through the lens of conceptual history, these tensions indicate that the transformation of the definition of progress was driven by structural changes, but operated differently across social groups. The coexistence of universal meanings and exclusionary practices implies a relative dissociation between discourse and the historical experience of certain subordinated groups. Moreover, it suggests that not all segments of the population were included, or at least not equally included, in the intended audience.

One possible interpretation is that the concept of progress itself is incapable of encompassing all members of a deeply segmented, hierarchical society in which lines of fracture and cleavages respond to different factors. The semantics of the emerging discourse (FDR's) incorporated collective aspirations, while its articulation in specific messages preserved the existing hierarchy. The position of African Americans in this context reveals the limits of the political consensus pursued through this discourse and the incompleteness of the social inclusion it promoted. Consequently, the emerging dominant consensus—and with it the evolving configuration—preserved significant components of its predecessor. Racial hierarchies remained part of the core that took shape during the 1930s, and the definition of progress that structured the new presidential discourse reflected this continuity from its inception.

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Abstract: This article examines the redefinition of the concept of "progress" in US presidential political discourse during the Great Depression and the first New Deal (1929–1935). Applying methods from conceptual history (semantic and onomasiological) alongside an evolutionary history framework, we analyze the speeches of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hoover articulated a classical liberal definition of progress centered on individual freedom, self-sufficiency, and formal equality of opportunity—a position that became disconnected from the structural realities of the crisis, thereby fracturing the existing political consensus. In contrast, Roosevelt constructed an alternative definition that assigned the state a central managerial role, emphasized collective welfare, and prioritized the "forgotten man." However, both definitions preserved racial hierarchies, excluding African Americans from full discursive inclusion. The article argues that, while the concept of progress transformed in response to structural change and functioned as a contested tool of political legitimation, its apparent universality coexisted with—and did not dismantle—deeply embedded social inequalities.

Keywords: progress, presidential discourse, Great Depression, New Deal, political consensus, racial hierarchy

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