

*Between abstract conjectures and concrete historical analysis:*

*Adam Smith's four stages theory reconsidered*

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*Abstract*

This article reconsiders the status of the so-called Four Stages Theory (FST) in Smith's work, and its relationship with the historical accounts of the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ) and Book III of the *Wealth of Nations* (WN). The article discusses some recent contributions to the literature, which claim that the FST is either a kind of fictitious economic model or a counterfactual thought experiment divorced from historical experience. These interpretations usually conflate the FST and what Smith presents as the "natural progress of opulence" in book III of WN, and accordingly imply there is a separation between *a priori* theory (economic model) and empirical history in Smith's work. We will argue that, though the FST is indeed presented as a purely conjectural thought experiment, the progression depicted in it from shepherding to agrarian and then to commercial societies was actually followed by Antient Greece and Modern Europe. And that, therefore, it should not be conflated with the model of the "natural progress of opulence", but rather that they fulfill different analytical roles in Smith's work.

*Key-words:* Adam Smith; Four Stages Theory; Philosophical History; Conjectural History;

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## **Introduction**

As is known, in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Adam Smith states that "[t]here are four distinct states which mankind pass thro" (LJ (A), i.27), which would be defined according to the predominant mode of subsistence (hunting, shepherding, agriculture, and commerce/manufacturing). This idea serves as a general framework of reference in Smith's lectures on private and public law, where he provides, among other things, a developmental account of the evolution of property rights and forms of government<sup>2</sup>. The same stage-based structure is used in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN) to explain the general relationship between the stage of society and its institutions of defense, justice, and education (and the associated expenditures) (cf. WN V.i.a, b).

The notion that societies go through or are in distinct and successive stages of socioeconomic improvement has traditionally been interpreted as a kind of theory of history. That is, as a theory aimed at explaining the actual development of societies or

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<sup>2</sup> Or "an account of the general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages and periods of society" (TMS VII.iv.37). Cf. especially LJ (A), i, iv, LJ (B), 19-79, 149-200.

their process of concrete historical change. In this line of interpretation, some have pointed out the presence of a materialistic conception of history in Smith's work<sup>3</sup> (Pascal, 1938; Meek, 1967 [1954]; 1976; Medick, 1981 [1973]; Skinner, 1975)<sup>4</sup>. Others have emphasized the "conjectural" nature of this theory of history (Höpfl, 1978; Berry, 2013; Palmeri, 2016) – despite possible disagreements about what is meant by "conjectural". Pocock (1999), in turn, notes that, while the stages theory is purely fictitious or conjectural, its attributes made it broadly applicable to European historical development.

Recently, this understanding has been challenged by Sagar (2022) and Paganelli (2022) – whose criticisms were endorsed by Burgio (2023). Sagar (2022) denies that the stages theory is a "conjectural history", in the sense of a theory aimed at explaining a real historical development that relies on conjectures in cases where evidence is lacking and factual inferences are required. According to him, this theory is actually a simplified and ideal economic model, or a purely thought experiment, which does not aim to explain any real historical development, but only to indicate what the path of economic development of an isolated society would be under ideal conditions and in the absence of political disturbances. Similarly, Paganelli (2022) suggests that the four stages theory is an economic model according to which societies would develop linearly, inevitably, and irreversibly through successive stages based on different modes of subsistence. Ultimately, both argue that not only the stages do not explain real historical evolution, but that the latter contradicts the "model", implying that Smith rejects this theory (Paganelli, 2022), or abandons it in his mature work (Sagar, 2022).

In this article, we intend to discuss the understanding that the stages theory is reducible to a kind of *a priori* economic model, or a purely thought experiment divorced from facts. On the one hand, these interpreters are correct in pointing out that the theory is presented by Smith as an abstract conjecture, and that it does not aim to directly explain the real historical development of any specific society (and therefore is not a theory of history). On the other hand, as we will seek to show, the progression in stages reflects at least in part the way Smith conceived the history of ancient Greek republics and "modern" Europe. Although the theory does not directly explain history, some of its categories, as well as the general idea of a progressive socioeconomic improvement, from a rude/"barbarous" state of society to a civilized one, seem to play a role in Smith's historical narrative. This seems to be characterized by a complex mixture of elements of natural and civil histories<sup>5</sup>. However, the way these latter elements are articulated in Smith's historical account remains an open question.

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<sup>3</sup> See Salter (1992) for a review of this debate. See Emerson (1984) for a critique of the idea that there is a materialist social science in Smith.

<sup>4</sup> Skinner (1982), in turn, qualified his previous position, establishing a distinction between the stadial theory used as a general framework in the analysis of jurisprudence, and Smith's historical narrative in LJ and especially in Book III of the WN. He argues that the stages theory does not directly provide an explanation of the concrete change between stages, but only socio-economic categories that would serve as the basis for the historical narrative. Nevertheless, in his view, concrete history would ultimately respect a progression in stages, provided that certain physical preconditions were present. Therefore, the stages would still be a general theory of historical development.

<sup>5</sup> This was noted by Pocock (1999, p. 315). However, Pocock did not properly demonstrate, as we will attempt to do, the presence of elements of the stadial account in Smith's historical narratives. See also Faria

If the latter point is correct, it is also valid to question whether indeed the stages theory is the same as the model of the “natural progress of opulence” presented by Smith in Book III of *WN*<sup>6</sup>. The latter is used by Smith as a kind of ideal yardstick to critically assess the actual economic progress of European nations<sup>7</sup>. It specifically refers to the most natural order of the employment of capital in an agrarian society, and therefore, to the process of transition from an agrarian to a commercial society. In this sense, this “model” does not necessarily contradict the idea that society evolves in stages.

On the other hand, although the four stages theory is presented as a kind of natural/conjectural account, Smith does not seem to use it as an ideal yardstick to judge European history. In the *LJ*, the stages (and the transition between them) serve primarily as a general framework of reference in the developmental account of rights (in particular, property rights) and forms of government (cf. *LJ* (A), i, iv, *LJ* (B), 19-79, 149-200). Its main analytical function is to show the general relationship between the stage of society, the form of property rights, and the forms of authority and government. And, consequently, to show how a change in the mode of subsistence affects the social, legal, and political institutions of a society.

### **Stages in concrete European history**

The recent works of Sagar (2022) and Paganelli (2022) are important for significantly problematizing traditional interpretations regarding Smith’s four stages theory. Sagar’s work, in particular, introduces a good deal of conceptual clarity by making a distinction between the four stages theory, as presented in the *LJ*, and Smith’s narrative about actual European history. In his understanding, the four stages theory would not be any kind of “history,” not even a “conjectural history,” in the sense that it would not aim to explain the history of any real society. It would be a conjecture without any factual basis (an “economic model”), aimed at indicating the most natural development trajectory of the modes of subsistence of an isolated society, under ideal conditions (the presence of fertile lands, for example) and without political disturbances. In turn, Smith’s actual historical narrative would be largely factual, not based on the use of conjectures, and would not follow the stages predicted by the “model.”<sup>8</sup>

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(2022, p. 13): “Sagar avoids the main issue at stake, [...] [namely] how enlightenment thinkers switched between – and often conflated – what we would call philosophical and historical forms of argument”.

<sup>6</sup> As suggested by Sagar (2022, pp. 22-24) and Paganelli (2022, p. 100). In this sense, the fact that modern European history did not follow the natural order of the progress of opulence is seen as a rejection of the idea that society goes through different stages of development according to the predominant mode of subsistence.

<sup>7</sup> See Schliesser (2005). Schliesser also assimilates the four stages to the model of the natural progress of opulence.

<sup>8</sup> Sagar (2022, pp. 25-26) asserts, however, that the early historical development of real societies generally conformed to what Smith’s theory predicts in the transition from the first to the second stage. However, the forms of later historical developments depended on so many accidents and contingencies that the model could neither predict (nor intended to). Sagar does not provide evidence for this assertion, however, and Paganelli (2022, p. 99) seems to be correct in arguing that the real societies of the first and second stages considered by Smith (including, among others, Native American tribes in the first case, and the Tartars and Arabs in the second) are societies that never progressed (i.e., they have always remained in the same stage).

Therefore, the four stages theory would basically fulfill two functions: (1) it would be useful from a pedagogical point of view to explain in theoretical terms how the forms of acquiring property rights are conditioned by the degree of economic development of society; (2) more importantly, it would serve to show, by contrast, how the actual history of European civilization did not follow the model, being the result of a set of contingencies and unpredictable processes (Sagar, 2022, p. 21).

In the same vein, Paganelli (2022) argues that Smith does not use the model of development in stages to explain the history of any real society. On the contrary, the historical developments analyzed by Smith, as well as many of the societies mentioned by him in his works (such as Native American societies, the Tartars, and the Arabs), would contradict the “model.” She suggests, therefore, that Smith would be precisely questioning the validity of this theory, which apparently would have been formulated *a priori*, or without reference to concrete historical evidence. Paganelli (2022) accordingly criticizes interpretations that suppose in Smith any kind of deterministic, fatalistic, linear, and/or teleological view of history.

By denying that the stages theory plays any role in Smith’s understanding of concrete European history, these interpretations leave open the question of the nature of Smith’s historical narrative. Would it be purely factual? Would European history be the result of a set of accidents, inexplicable by theory? Would the philosophical idea of a transition between distinct states of society serve no argumentative purpose in Smith’s view of the process of European historical change?

On the one hand, it is true that Smith begins the discussion of property rights by occupation in the LJ by proposing a conjecture *à la* state of nature. Smith conducts a thought experiment to illustrate how a small group of people settling on a desert island would acquire subsistence. The most natural (or likely) order of succession of modes of subsistence followed by this group – as it increased in number and successively found itself in situations of scarcity – would coincide with the succession of the stages of hunting, shepherding, agriculture, and commerce (division of labor and manufacturing) (cf. LJ (A), i.27-32; LJ (B), 149-150).

Thus, the mode of presentation of the stages theory, or the idea that there is a more likely order of succession among the modes of providing subsistence, is purely conjectural. But would the idea itself of a successive progression between stages of socioeconomic improvement, from a rude/“barbarous” state of society to a civilized and commercial one, be purely fictitious, or without any reference to facts? Smith gives an indication to the contrary, stating that “in almost all countries the age of shepherds preceded that of agriculture,” and the only case apparently contradicting the rule (Native American tribes) is actually a false exception (LJ (A), i.29). According to Sagar (2022, p. 15, n. 6), however, an analysis of Smith’s view of the history of ancient Greek republics and modern Europe would show that, ultimately, “Smith did not see the four stages model as applying anywhere.”

Sagar’s (2022, p. 29-34) thesis is fundamentally based on two points: (i) in ancient Greek cities, the development of agriculture would have occurred simultaneously with

the development of internal and external trade, and not in sequence;<sup>9</sup> (ii) feudalism could not be qualified as the third stage of Smith's model (agrarian society), being actually "an extremely badly organized, economically backward, and perversely governed form of commercial society, insofar as many individuals therein still live primarily from exchange" (ibid., p. 33, n. 26).

In the following, we will attempt to show from the analysis of other passages from the LJ and WN that: (a) in reality, Smith's view of the history of Greek republics generally respects a scheme of successive improvement, which would ultimately lead to the downfall of the republics; (b) although feudalism, from a certain point, is indeed a complex or hybrid socioeconomic formation, this does not contradict the stage theory, but rather means that the transition from an agrarian to a commercial society in Europe happened upside down. Even if we accept the definition of feudalism as an anomalous type of commercial society,<sup>10</sup> it is possible to show that there was before its establishment, in Smith's view, a purely agrarian society (without manufacturing and without foreign trade).

In this sense, in both cases, it is possible to discern a progression that starts from a society of shepherds, which settles in territories with fertile soils and develops "rude" forms of agriculture before starting the improvement of manufacturing and trade. That is, there is a progression from the second to the fourth stages, although, in the case of modern Europe, the transition from an agrarian to a commercial society occurred in an "unnatural and retrograde" manner, which delayed the process and made it uncertain (WN III.i.9, III.iv.19).

Let us first consider the case of Ancient Greece. In the LJ, Smith asserts that the development and progress of the forms of government in ancient Greece began within a society of shepherds.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, he states that, until the Trojan War, the Greeks had little or no cultivation of the soil (LJ (B), 31-2). Still, regarding this period, Smith states that the Greeks had a form of government typical of shepherds, in which several clans were under the rule of a "chieftain" (LJ (A), v.44; cf. also LJ (A), iv.11-2). In this form of government, the political power of the "chieftain" is based on the great material dependence in which his subordinates find themselves.

Smith suggests, then, that after the Trojan War, there was a division of lands that founded the small republics in Greece. In LJ (A), i.51-2, he states that land ownership arises through an agreed division, concomitantly with the emergence of cities (cf. also LJ (B), 151-2), and in LJ (B), 31-2, he states that this occurred in Greece. From the division of lands (and possibly as a consequence of it), there would have been a change in the established form of government, with the introduction of aristocratic monarchies (and no longer a government of shepherds), which eventually would convert into republican forms (aristocracy and democracy) (LJ (A), v.44).

From this period until the Second Persian War, according to Smith, the Greeks were small "agrarian states," "a nation of mere husbandmen," just like the people of the

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<sup>9</sup> This thesis is based on the analysis of LJ (A), iv.60-2. See Sagar (2022, p. 31).

<sup>10</sup> It should be said, however, that Smith nowhere characterizes feudalism in this way.

<sup>11</sup> See, however, *Considerations concerning the first formation of languages*, 37, where Smith states that the ancient Greeks descended from "wandering savages".

Peloponnesians until the time of the Peloponnesian War, and the Romans before the republic (“under their kings”) (WN V.i.a.7). Smith implicitly refers to the third stage when speaking of “those nations of husbandmen who have little foreign commerce and no other manufactures, but those coarse and household ones which almost every private family prepares for its own use” (WN V.i.a.6; cf. LJ (A), iv.78). What characterizes this stage is precisely the predominance of an agrarian mode of subsistence, or the relative absence of refined manufactures and foreign trade.

Smith specifically refers to the time before the “improvement of arts,” in which, due to the absence of refined manufactures and a profound division of labor, a much larger number of citizens could go to war (LJ (B), 38; WN V.i.a.7, 11). This is further confirmed in LRBL, ii.143, where Smith states that only at the end of the Second Persian War did soldiers begin to be paid to fight (cf. also WN V.i.a.10). He states that, at that time, promoting war was the most effective way to enrich oneself and gain the favors of the people, but things changed with the introduction of commerce.

Finally, came the period of improvement in arts and manufactures (LJ (A), iv.84-5), which caused a series of social and political changes. Commerce and manufactures completely altered the state of affairs in the republic of Athens, allowing greater equality among the citizens; and, equally, making them unwilling to participate in the courts and wars without obtaining a reward in return (LRBL, ii.144-7). This would mark the beginning of the well-known decline of the Greek republics, which we will not address here (cf. LJ (A), iv.76-87; LJ (B), 37-41).

A similar process of development between different socioeconomic stages can be seen in Smith’s narrative of the history of European nations after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Indeed, the civilizational and historical process of modern Europe begins with the invasions of the western provinces of the Roman Empire by Germanic and Scythian tribes (WN III.ii.1). Smith sometimes characterizes these tribes as nations of shepherds with some notion of agriculture and land ownership (LJ (A), ii.97-8, iv.114-5, iv.124-5; LJ (B), 49-50). Elsewhere, as “nations of husbandmen who are but just come out of the shepherd state, and who are not much advanced beyond that state,” making an explicit parallel with “the Greek tribes” at the time of the Trojan War (WN V.i.b.16).<sup>12</sup>

The consideration of the state of society of the “barbarian” tribes is important to explain the type of property relations and forms of authority and government established at that time. According to Smith, shepherding societies are characterized by the presence of great social inequality due to the concentration of property on flocks and herds. The possession of these animals confers great political authority to a small number of chiefs, usually subordinate to a sovereign. This is because the majority of the population depends on them to obtain their means of subsistence, and they expend the surplus rude produce maintaining many dependents, given the absence of manufactures and trade (WN V.i.b.7, 12-3).

In the case of the shepherding societies that invaded the Roman Empire, this hierarchical social structure was reflected in an extremely unequal engrossing of the lands

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<sup>12</sup> Another explicit parallel drawn elsewhere as a precondition for Greek and modern European development is the existence of fertile lands and rivers and seas that potentially serve as means of communication and commerce (LJ (B), 31).

by the “chiefs and principal leaders of those nations” (WN III.ii.1). These chiefs and leaders thus became large landowners, acquiring great political and military power, being at the same time legislators and judges of those who depended on their protection. Land had become not only a means of subsistence but a source of power and protection; there was a constant state of war between landowners and between landowners and the sovereign. In this historical context, the large extent of rural properties was seen as a necessary condition to ensure their security (WN III.ii.3), since small landowners did not have sufficient resources to defend themselves against invasions (cf. LJ (A), i.130-1). Thus, to preserve the concentration of land ownership, the laws of primogeniture and entails were gradually introduced (WN III.ii.2-3).

In the LJ, Smith calls the political system founded on this new configuration of land ownership as “allodial government,” which would later (about 400 years later) be supplanted by the feudal government (LJ (A), iv.114-5), both being implicitly characterized as *uncivilized monarchies*.<sup>13</sup> This is a form of government prevailing in an agrarian society, without manufactures and trade, given that the barbarian invasions emptied the cities and interrupted the division of labor between town and countryside (WN III.ii.1; LJ (A), iv.116). Similarly, Smith comments on the great authority of the feudal barons and the clergy of the Catholic Church in the “ancient state of Europe, before the establishment of arts and manufactures,” referring at least until the thirteenth century (cf. WN V.i.g.22).

This state of society is predominantly characterized by an agrarian mode of production, in which agricultural production and consumption occurred locally. Due to the absence of manufactures and trade, the surplus of agricultural production was expended by the feudal lords in maintaining a “multitude of retainers and dependents,” characterizing a kind of “rustick hospitality” (WN III.iv.5). The form of consumption of agricultural surplus, therefore, combined with the extreme concentration of land (preserved by institutional mechanisms), or “the state of property and manners” (WN III.iv.8), was the cause of the relationships of dependency and domination existing in this state of society.

Smith explicitly calls this condition a “rude state of society which precedes the extension of commerce and the improvement of manufactures” (WN V.iii.1; cf. WN III.iv.5, 11). Elsewhere, Smith curiously reduces the first three stages, including “that rude state of husbandry which precedes the improvement of manufactures, and the extension of foreign commerce,” to the category of “barbarous societies” (WN V.i.f.51),<sup>14</sup> making a contrast with “a civilized and commercial society” (WN V.i.f.52), or then a “commercial state of society” (WN V.iii.5).

Certainly, this state of affairs began to change as cities gradually developed from foreign trade, importing manufactures and trading with the countryside, and subsequently developing their own manufactures through a type of import substitution (cf. WN

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. WN V.ii.a.15, 16, 19, 20, where Smith refers to the modern European monarchies as *civilized*, in opposition to the monarchies of the feudal times. See also WN V.i.a.6-7, 12.

<sup>14</sup> “It is otherwise in the barbarous societies, as they are commonly called, of hunters, of shepherds, and even of husbandmen in that rude state of husbandry which precedes the improvement of manufactures, and the extension of foreign commerce.” (WN V.i.f.51)

III.iii.13, 15-6, 19-20). Gradually, the production of luxury manufactures and commerce with the countryside, in exchange for agricultural surpluses, would erode the power of feudal lords (cf. WN III.iv.13-15, 18), giving rise to modern “civilized monarchies.”

Through this process of development, which Smith characterizes as “unnatural and retrograde”, a predominantly agrarian society marked by direct personal dependency relations was transformed into a commercial society with indirect relations of dependence between individuals. Simultaneously, a political regime based on the arbitrary power of the feudal barons was supplanted by civilized monarchies, where a separation between executive and judicial power is generally observed.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the transition occurred inversely to the natural course does not imply that there was no gradual process of improvement, starting from a “rude state” of agriculture to a commercial society based on the division of labor between towns and countryside, and on foreign trade.

We do not mean by this that the stages theory is directly mobilized to explain European history, nor that the stages are the focus of Smith’s interest. But that, in his narrative of the progress of European societies, Smith apparently mixes elements of the stages theory with considerations of civil history (cf. Pocock, 1999). There seems to be a role to be played by the idea of gradual improvement in the way of providing subsistence for European nations, with an emphasis on the transition from a “barbarous” (or uncivilized) society based on a “rude state of husbandry” – identified with feudal society – to a “commercial and civilized state of society.” In this sense, as pointed out by Faria (2022, p. 13), there is an open problem to be clarified by research, namely, how theoretical/philosophical and historical elements are articulated in Smith’s understanding of European history.

#### **Four Stages vs “natural progress of opulence”**

If the reasoning outlined in the previous section is correct, it is worth asking whether indeed the theory of succession between stages of socioeconomic improvement should be conflated with the model of the “natural progress of opulence.”<sup>16</sup> This idea, in turn, arises from the consideration that the four stages theory is an a priori model of natural economic development. What justification would Smith have, after all, for presenting a purely conjectural or counter-factual theory or “model”? Wouldn’t it be contradictory on his part to base his theory on a conjecture without facticity, given the criticism he directs towards the use of a fictitious “state of nature” to analyze the foundation of property rights and the institution of civil government?<sup>17</sup> One possible answer is provided by Sagar (2022, p. 21): “because the simplified modeling device of the four stages would in due course also allow Smith to identify why actual historical

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<sup>15</sup> On this, see Forbes (1975, p. 191-2).

<sup>16</sup> As suggested by Sagar (2022, p. 22-4) and Paganelli (2022, p. 100). Schliesser (2005) also seems to share this understanding.

<sup>17</sup> Thus, for instance, Smith criticizes Pufendorf by saying that “it in reality serves no purpose to treat of the laws which would take place in a state of nature, or by what means succession to property was carried on, as *there is no such state existing*” (LJ (B), 3, our emphasis).



developments took markedly different turns from what might be expected by pure economic theory.”

In this sense, the four stages would fundamentally serve the same analytical function as the model of the natural progress of opulence (WN III.i). This “model” is presented by Smith in Book III as the most natural order of succession of the employment of capital “in every society that had any territory” (WN III.i.8). According to this order, the improvement of agriculture would precede the employment of capital in manufactures, and this would precede the employment of capital in foreign trade. According to this logic, the growth of cities (the locus of manufactures) depends on the improvement of agriculture, since it provides the former with means of subsistence, raw materials to be manufactured, and a large market for urban production. The development of manufactures in cities, in turn, would eventually lead to the development of foreign trade, which provides an important market for luxury goods.

The order represented in this model, however, does not explain the order actually observed in European economic progress, as this occurred in an “unnatural and retrograde” manner (WN III.i.9). In this sense, the function of the model of the natural progress of opulence is not to explain European history, but rather, on the contrary, to provide a kind of ideal yardstick against which the actually existing course of events can be judged and critically evaluated. In particular, this method allows Smith to draw attention to the role of human institutions in deviating the course of events from the natural course, slowing down economic progress (cf. Schliesser, 2005).

However, although in the LJ the theory of the four stages is presented as a kind of natural/conjectural account, Smith does not seem to use it as an ideal yardstick to judge European history. In the LJ, the stages (and the transition between them) serve primarily as a general reference framework in the developmental account of rights (in particular, property rights) and forms of government (cf. LJ (A), i, iv, LJ (B), 19-79, 149-200). Its main analytical function is to theoretically show the general relationship between the stage of society, the form of property rights, and the forms of authority and government. And, consequently, to show how a change in the way of providing subsistence affects the social, legal, and political institutions of a society.

As argued by Berry (2013), this aspect of the stages theory reflects Smith’s aspiration for a scientific social theory. It aims to provide a causal explanation of the interdependence of institutions and cultural, social, and political practices of a society, anchored by a conception of the general characteristics of human nature and the general external circumstances of society (associated largely, but not exclusively, with the state of property relations and modes of subsistence) (cf. also Medick, 1973, p. 151). In this sense, the stages of society also fulfill an important analytical role in Smith’s historical narrative (for example, in his explanation of the causal interdependence between the “state of property and manners” of medieval agrarian society and feudal forms of government).

It is worth noting, however, that Smith’s conjectural, theoretical, or natural account of the development of rights and forms of government often leads to or blends with the consideration of rights, laws, and forms of government of real European societies. In this sense, the narrative sometimes shifts without mediation from a

conjectural account of the progress of rights and forms of government of “mankind” in general to the consideration of Roman and/or feudal laws, or the progress of government in Greece, for example.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, this indicates that the “model” was developed with a view to European historical development.<sup>19</sup> As Pocock (1999, p. 317) notes, “it was built upon premises that made it peculiarly applicable to the history of Europe,” so “the movement from shepherd to farmer to merchant and polite citizen, in which ‘the progress of society’ was held to consist, was presented as occurring in the history of Europe alone” – Native Americans and Asian shepherds being excluded from this trajectory of development.

Finally, it seems to us that the idea of a successive progression of socioeconomic improvement, although not directly used to explain history, still provides a kind of general historical sense to Smith’s narrative. Despite the “unnatural and retrograde” form of the modern European transition from agrarian to commercial societies, there remains the idea of progress from the rude or barbarous to the civilized, from the simple to the complex.<sup>20</sup> This refers to the mode of production (state of cultivation of the land, presence or absence of refined manufactures and foreign trade), customs (change in the consumption pattern of the rich, transition from rustic hospitality to conspicuous consumption), change in the form of social relations (from direct personal dependency relations to indirect dependency relations), among others.<sup>21</sup> This process coincides with the transition from feudal to commercial society.

## Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the thesis that the four stages theory is a purely fictitious conjecture divorced from historical experience. We presented the hypothesis that, although it is presented as a thought experiment, some of its categories, as well as the general idea of a progressive socioeconomic improvement, from a rude or “barbarous” state (associated with shepherding societies and agrarian societies without manufactures) to a civilized state (characterized by the presence of refined manufactures and foreign trade), seem to play some role in Smith’s historical narrative. This narrative appears to be characterized precisely by a complex mixture of elements (concepts and temporality) of natural history and civil history, of socioeconomic stages and concrete forms of government (including, for example, the transition from feudal governments to civilized monarchies). Finally, we argued that the four stages should not be conflated with the

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<sup>18</sup> The clearest example of this is the consideration of the evolution of forms of government, where Smith begins by narrating the progress of government in an abstract manner (in the first two stages), and from a certain point onward, the narrative shifts to the consideration of the evolution of forms of government in Europe (cf. LJ (A), iv, v; LJ (B), 19-79). A general discussion (historically undetermined, or little determined) regarding the early stages turns into a specific discussion about the historical development of institutions in Greek and Roman societies, and then feudal and modern ones.

<sup>19</sup> In this sense, for example, Höfl (1978, p. 32) argues that the stages are a theoretical construct elaborated logically after Smith’s erudite historical knowledge, serving among other things as a way to organize and give a philosophical sense to real historical knowledge.

<sup>20</sup> See WN IV.i.30, where Smith refers to the feudal state of society (but also to societies of shepherds) as a “simple state”, without “the finer and more improved manufactures”.

<sup>21</sup> On this, see Berry (1997; 2013, p. 49-50).

model of the “natural progress of opulence,” presented in Book III of the *Wealth of Nations*, since both apparently perform distinct analytical functions in Smith’s work.

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