The Lost Promise of Progressivism

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Lost Promise is both a history and theory of American politics and political ideas in the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s). Within the field of political science, the book is best understood as situated against two ahistorical modes of analysis. The first is driven by behaviorist models of interest group pluralism and economic models of public choice, and the second by timeless ideals of liberty and equality derived from natural rights and natural law philosophy institutionalized in the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution. Within the field of history, Lost Promise sought to restore a distinctly political history at a time when most American historical writings tended to favor social history—the downplaying of national narratives of transformative political ideas, actors, and actions in favor of bringing to light local, gendered, ethnic, racial, and regional identities and their struggles for recognition and agency.

In the original acknowledgments I pointed to the centrality of the annual (later biannual) Studies in American Political Development journal by Stephen Skowronek and Karen Orren in 1986 and to two conferences in the early 1990s at UCLA and Yale that consolidated the interests and agendas of political scientists and historians in what became a separate field of study. This new field entailed a “regime-period” understanding of American political history that charted not only changes in party/electoral control of national politics but also the political cultures, ideological appeals, and institutional innovations in those periods and, thus, the larger changes in relationships between institutions and public policy. Here too Studies was the major venue, and members of its editorial board a major source of both scholarship and new graduate students in the field. Behind this innovation and intellectual excitement was the decisive influence of Stephen
Skowronek’s 1982 book *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920*. I was privileged to have been on Stephen’s dissertation committee at Cornell when his thesis was the first draft of that book—a case of a student inspiring his teacher!

Those much younger than I might not appreciate the 1960s intellectual complacency among political scientists, political economists, and sociologists when I began my graduate studies at Berkeley (and even more evident at Harvard as an undergraduate in the late 1950s). Underwriting this complacency was a liberal consensus in which our politics was a self-correcting system of interest group pluralism led by elites who spontaneously followed democratic rules of the game. The title phrase “lost promise” is addressed to that hegemonic complacency and the book a studied reminder that their reforming forebears—and their disciplinary founders—both tried harder and thought more deeply about their nation, its political history, and its future than those today. The phrase also echoes Herbert Croly’s *The Promise of American Life* (1909), the urtext of early twentieth-century reformers.

Part of *Lost Promise*’s purpose then is to restore thinking comprehensively and critically about our country and its political history. Note that each of the seven chapters has either “nation” or “nationalism” in its title. This was a deliberate and, in retrospect, somewhat underappreciated element in the book. Progressive social scientists insisted that all social knowledge (to quote from the book) “must be cosmopolitan in origin and national in import” [7]. Part of the substance of this knowledge was their call for and assistance in the creation of nationally conscious bodies to power their reforms—what I term national “parastates” in the book. These organizations and institutions are not formally part of the national government but are integral to the creation of a modern nation-“state.” National research universities, academic associations, and their disciplinary journals; charitable foundations, reform societies, and professional social service agencies; women’s organizations; churches and their ancillary bodies; journals of opinion; professional, business, and occupational organizations; trade unions; and, not least, efficient and
honest state and local governments—these are the ligaments required to create and sustain America as an authentic nation-state under conditions of transformative demographic, economic, and social change. There can be no American nationality without an American people; national parastates are essential for their creation and maintenance. Big government, the Progressives argued—especially the bloated patronage- and party-dominated governments constructed after the Civil War—is not the same as a strong state capable of effective historical agency. A related, undervalued theme was the stress on the need for a historically conscious and sacred “narrative” to underwrite American nationality—an embracive civil religion that functioned as an informal but powerful religious establishment—perhaps a signal achievement of Progressive academics, intellectuals, and reformers.

I wrote two later books to further articulate these themes. The first of these was influenced by three books published shortly after Lost Promise that shared much of its nationalist spirit: Michael Lind’s The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution (1995), Richard Rorty’s Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America (1998), and Stanley Fish’s The Trouble with Principle (1999). In the first of my two later books, The Next Religious Establishment: National Identity and Political Theology in Post-Protestant America (2000), I wrote six short chapter glosses on the religious and national narrative themes in Lost Promise as indicated by their titles: Identities, Regimes, Theologies/Ideologies, Institutions, Alternatives, and Signs. The second book, Sacred Discourse and American Nationality (2012), is a more wide-ranging analysis of American nationality based on my later research in articles, papers, and book chapters. Since I argued so strenuously in all three books about the relationships among institutions, authority, and nationality, it was fitting that my last major contribution was the opening chapter of a collection edited by Stephen Skowronek, Stephen Engel, and Bruce Ackerman, The Progressives’ Century: Political Reform, Constitutional Government, and the Modern American State (2016). In “A Progressive Conundrum: Federal Constitution, National State, and Popular
Sovereignty,” I raise the issue of Progressive ideas on contending sources of political legitimacy.

Through no fault of my own, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 unleashed a fury of contentious debate on nationalism. Trump’s campaign and governing rhetoric have encouraged many of today’s Left intellectuals to denounce American nationalism as inherently reactionary, if not racist and sexist. It is almost as if Lincoln and the Civil War—the two iconic symbols of Progressive nationalism and, in Croly’s *Promise*, the key narrative link between the American founding and America’s future—did not exist. One is reminded of the words of the Southern senator James Beck during the Reconstruction period: “There is that contemptible word Nation—a word no good Democrat uses, when he can find any other, and when forced to use it, utters in disgust. This is no nation. We are free and independent States” ([New York Tribune](https://www.nytimes.com/1875/08/13/), 13 August 1875). In the July 18, 2019, issue of *Atlantic*, Adam Serwer pits American nationalism against abstract ideals of a multiracial/multicultural democracy. “White nationalism was a formal or informal governing doctrine of the United States until 1965, or for most of its existence as a country. . . . Trump is assailing the moral foundations of the multiracial democracy Americans have struggled to bring into existence since 1965, and unless Trumpism is defeated, that fragile project will fail.” So much for a national narrative!

The libertarian and constitutional-originalist factions in the Republican Party might also rediscover the intellectual and politically empowering elements of a national narrative represented and articulated by earlier (and Republican) Progressives. Instead, a generation of conservative scholars have attacked the “historicist” influence that study in Germany had on Progressive theologians and social scientists as well as on the intellectual foundations of national universities and divinity schools. In its stead, they offer the thin gruel of constitutional interpretation, the mathematical equations of market efficiencies, and the endless thickets of natural right and natural law philosophy. To reject the resources within the Progressive narrative is to reject the ways in which it integrated the settlements and founding of America, the Revolution and Constitution, major national reli-
gious movements, and the rebirth of America through Lincoln and the Civil War. At the time when American political thought was both sterile and empty, the Progressives’ reintroduction of historical consciousness into American political life is a priceless legacy. And without that liberating and empowering legacy, we might be left with a “policy state” governed by unsustainable administrative elites with its corporate and “parastate” allies bootlessly trying to manipulate a sullen and embittered nation of clients, consumers, dependents, and patients—but not agents and citizens.

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