Introduction

In the year 1900, “liberal” was not a common word in the vocabulary of American political reformers seeking to develop a theoretical or political response to industrialism and its effects. “Liberalism” they recognized as a philosophy that had developed as an assertion of individual rights against the divine right theories of absolute monarchies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The great theorists of classical European liberalism—such as Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Kant, and Mill—had stressed personal and political rights such as religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom from arbitrary arrest. Most liberal writers had also emphasized constitutionalism and favored legal equality as opposed to the hereditary privileges of the ancien régime. These arguments were attractive to Croly and other reformers.

Unfortunately, classical liberal theory also advanced two other positions that were less appealing in the American reform context. First, many classical liberals were at best unenthusiastic democrats. They certainly preferred democracy to autocracy, but they were often unsure that the majority of the population was very concerned about individual freedom; forced to a choice between democracy and freedom, classical liberals didn’t hesitate to choose the latter. Second, and even more important, liberalism was closely associated with laissez-faire economic theory. Classical liberals—Locke is the best example—had emphasized private property as a necessary component of individual liberty. At times, the opposition of liberals to arbitrary government seemed to mean opposition to the
regulation of property and of the economy as much as or more than opposition to limitations on personal liberties.

American liberalism had exhibited its own special emphases. In particular, Jefferson, and then even more clearly liberals in the Jacksonian period as well as Lincoln, had shown themselves open to democracy to a greater extent than their European cousins. Even so, in the last years of the nineteenth century, "liberalism" as a political theory was still very closely identified in the United States with laissez-faire theory and even (in an exaggerated form) with the radical individualism of the social Darwinist William Graham Sumner. American reformers were perhaps dimly aware that English liberalism had begun a transition from the laissez-faire theories of Herbert Spencer to the newer liberalism of T. H. Green and Leonard Hobhouse, but they did not use the word "liberal" to describe their own positions.

In the political arena, the reform impulse was disorganized in 1900. Bryan's Democrats had fought the battle of free silver in 1896 and had been defeated by William McKinley and Mark Hanna. The populists had begun exposing the seamier sides of the swiftly developing trusts and had sought to develop a political opposition to the domination of the political system by eastern business interests. But populism did not propose a coherent philosophic alternative to laissez-faire. Labor unions were fighting for workers' rights, but they also failed to develop a larger political program. Social reformers of various persuasions were attempting to deal with the effects of industrialization and urbanization, but again they usually failed to demonstrate a broader understanding of political change. Of course, a systematic critique of McKinley's essentially capitalist and imperialist program was to be found in American socialism. However, the socialists' appeal was limited for many reasons, including the sense that socialism was "un-American," that its doctrines were foreign and thus not the appropriate basis for a fundamental reformulation of American society.

By 1920, these intellectual and political conditions had all changed dramatically. Following the political successes of the progressive movement, "liberalism" was now the preferred term for a coherent reformist political theory. This new liberalism had borrowed extensively from classical liberal theory, but in coming to stress the need for an active role by government in addressing social problems, progressives had redefined a number of the central concepts of liberalism, a process continued by their successors in the New Deal. "Reform liberalism" thus embodied a fundamentally changed view of politics. The new liberalism incorporated some aspects of socialism, yet it more consistently defined itself against socialism. Indeed, the new liberals very consciously sought to find a "middle way" between capitalism and socialism.
By 1920, liberals thus viewed themselves as reformers with a comprehensive program that valued the traditional liberal concern for individual rights and what we have come to call "civil liberties." But they also realized that these objectives had to be reconciled with a strong yet democratic government, if they were to be achieved in a regulated yet still fundamentally capitalist economy. In these twenty years, American reformers adopted much of classical liberalism, particularly the emphasis on individual freedoms. But they deemphasized (while not abandoning) property rights and embraced both democracy and a strong government as elements of the new liberal theory. These were important changes, which in many respects set the course for American liberalism for the remainder of the twentieth century.

The political vehicle for these intellectual and political changes was the progressive movement. Progressivism was a broad reform movement that worked through many political groups. It took heart from the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt and was embodied explicitly in his Bull Moose Progressive party of 1912. But progressivism also worked through the Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson, particularly in the years 1914 to 1918. Progressivism was also advanced by some socialists, by prohibitionists, and by many nonpartisan groups.

Progressives such as Croly sought primarily to use government—particularly the national government and even more particularly the national executive—to control the power of business. They sought to assert the public interest against the trusts and to regulate or to destroy concentrated economic power. They favored such measures as wages and hours legislation, pure food and drug laws, the regulation of the banking system, and the recognition of the rights of organized labor. Progressives also sought to democratize the political system, attacking the political corruption and political bosses that they saw as allied to business interests.

Progressivism in its many forms brought about fundamental changes in the American political, social, and economic systems. In 1920, the Republicans under Harding campaigned for a "return to normalcy" and sought to dismantle some of the new institutions of government that the progressives had constructed. However, they weren't able to return to the status quo ante, and when the Great Depression again stirred American reform, the New Deal was able to build on the foundations that the progressives had established. New Deal liberalism also built on the theoretical foundations of the new liberalism of the progressives—adapting the theory, but still holding to the fundamental combination of individual liberties and a reliance on democratic government to solve social problems.

These changes effected by American progressive politics were the
work of many men and women. Indeed, the progressive movement was such a broad reform movement that no one historian has fully succeeded in capturing its many parts. Similarly, the changes in American liberalism in the progressive era were wrought by many writers, and no one theorist can claim full credit for developing the new understanding. As R. Jeffrey Lustig has written, the new liberalism has lacked a “synthetic theorist” who could define modern liberalism as Locke or Jefferson had come close to doing for earlier liberal theory. Unfortunately, this lack of a fully systematic statement of modern American liberalism has not been remedied in the New Deal or in liberal reformulations in the later years of the century.

My argument is that Herbert Croly is rightly accorded a place in the front rank among the major writers who were influential in changing liberal theory. A brief review of Croly’s career will demonstrate the range and evolution of Croly’s thought, an evolution carried on in the context of progressive politics.

Herbert Croly first came to prominence in 1909, when he published *The Promise of American Life*. The book, begun in 1905, was stimulated by the stirrings of political change during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency. Croly agreed that reforms were needed, but very specifically critiqued the developing reform movement, arguing that reformers needed a more coherent political philosophy if they were to have a lasting impact. Croly’s purpose was thus to provide an intellectual program for progressivism, and *The Promise* is a strong attack on laissez-faire and a sustained argument for government to act on economic and social ills. Croly refers to “progressives” and “reformers” and calls his own proposals “national democracy” or the “new nationalism.” But he does not argue in 1909 that he is developing a new “liberal” political theory. Nonetheless, I shall show that Croly’s political theory was fundamentally liberal from the start, that *The Promise* exhibits very significant continuities with classical liberal theory. At the same time, it is a new liberalism, articulated within the context of progressive political reform.

*The Promise* was complimentary about Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, and Roosevelt’s *Outlook* returned the compliment with a favorable review. Roosevelt began to adopt more advanced positions in his 1910 campaign to elect progressives to Congress, and particularly as T.R. used Croly’s phrase, the “New Nationalism,” to describe his position, Croly gained influence in the movement and was (excessively) assumed by political observers to be the theorist behind Roosevelt’s progressivism. Croly enjoyed this prominence, and while he remained primarily the intellectual critic, he did become involved in the formation of the Progressive party and strongly supported Roosevelt in the 1912 election.
Following Roosevelt’s defeat, and his own completion of a biography of Mark Hanna, Croly began work on a sequel to *The Promise*. This book, first delivered as the Godkin Lectures at Harvard, was published in 1914 as *Progressive Democracy*. In this work, Croly refined and even altered a number of his earlier theoretical positions. Again the theory was dependent on classical liberalism in many respects, but Croly used the word only occasionally to describe his own positions, still preferring “progressive.” *Progressive Democracy* continued Croly’s earlier attack on laissez-faire, and it amplified his argument for government regulation of the economy. But in this work, which was written to guide the reform movement even more explicitly than the earlier book, Croly moved to a much more democratic position, now including a more sustained analysis of society from a pluralist point of view and adopting pragmatist arguments as well. In short, by 1914 Croly had developed a political theory very close in its general outlines to modern reform liberalism.

In that year, Croly was given a vehicle for the further development and dissemination of his ideas when Mr. and Mrs. Willard Straight agreed to provide financial support to establish a weekly “journal of opinion,” the *New Republic*. As founding editor, Croly played the dominant role in setting the editorial policy of “the paper” for the next fourteen years, and the *New Republic* gave him an even more prominent position in the reform movement.

Croly’s *New Republic* continued his emphasis on political and economic reform spearheaded by a democratic national government, and he now increasingly characterized his theory as “liberal.” The reasons for this explicit recognition of his own liberal heritage are several and seem to include the wartime desire to identify his theory with Anglo-American traditions in opposition to German authoritarian theory. Most important, however, was the dismay that Croly and his associates (including Walter Lippmann, Walter Weyl, Felix Frankfurter, Learned Hand, and John Dewey) experienced in response to increased government repression after the United States entered World War I. The recognition that government could oppress individuals politically, as the classical liberals had argued, while at the same time liberating them from economic and social oppression, forced Croly to reemphasize the importance of individual freedoms that had been present but de-emphasized in his earlier books. He came to think explicitly of his theory as a new version of liberalism even as the historic truths of liberalism came alive in his own political life.

By the end of the war, the *New Republic* was clearly the leading liberal journal in the United States. It enabled Croly to speak strongly for liberal principles and guaranteed that his voice would be heard on all major issues of public policy.
In partisan politics, the *New Republic* had been founded to support Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive party. However, the editors soon broke with Roosevelt, supporting Woodrow Wilson in 1916 as he moved toward developing stronger measures for government regulation of the economy. Foreign policy quickly became a dominant concern as the war developed, and Croly and Lippmann attempted to influence Wilson in developing a liberal foreign policy. They used the term “Peace without Victory” in an editorial and advocated a “League to Enforce Peace.” When Wilson picked up the former phrase and also supported the idea of a league, the liberal publicists were perceived as being influential with the administration, and the *New Republic*’s circulation soared. However, this political involvement ended abruptly with the publication of the text of the Treaty of Versailles, which Croly thought a betrayal of the stated aims of American entry into the war. He took the *New Republic* into opposition to Wilson and the treaty.

The years 1919 and 1920 were crucial for the testing of Croly’s liberalism. After a period of political involvement and some real influence, he was now in opposition. The war and then the treaty and concomitant domestic political events, most notably the “Red Scare” of 1919–1920, forced Croly to try to restate his now explicitly liberal political theory. He wrote yet another book, *The Breach in Civilization*, and then withdrew it, relying instead on a series of long articles in “the paper” to make his thoughts clear. His attempt to state the philosophic supports for liberalism continued for most of the decade of “normalcy.” In this period of reaction, Croly supplemented his interest in politics with investigations into a number of other topics that he thought would ground liberalism on a firmer footing, including education, religion, and psychology. His writings in this period illustrate how a liberal political theorist continued to develop in a period of political and cultural adversity.

This introductory review of the development of Croly’s political thought should make it clear that he was both a serious thinker, who attempted to develop a liberal political theory, and an important political figure in the progressive movement. I think he came as close as any writer to stating the central assumptions of modern American liberalism: that individual freedoms can be combined with a strong, democratic national government, a government that must assume responsibility to improve social and economic conditions. Even so, it is not clear that Croly succeeded in attaining a full theoretical coherence in his works. By 1919–1920, when the various elements of the theory were in place, Croly was becoming disillusioned with politics. He sought to reformulate his theory in *The Breach in Civilization*, but realized that his analysis was not sufficiently
powerful and withdrew the book. Croly's last years exhibit a struggle by a creative thinker to state his views in a final form, a struggle that I believe he ultimately lost. American liberalism lost also, for Croly taught his contemporaries much; his views would have been even more influential if they could have been stated in a final systematic form.