Shaping Modern Liberalism
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Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought.

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This book is a study of the thought and political career of Herbert Croly (1869-1930). My argument is that Croly was an important figure in the theoretical redefinition of American liberalism that took place in the early years of the twentieth century. This intellectual change occurred in the context of the progressive movement, which sought to respond to the abuses that had developed in the American political and economic systems during the "Gilded Age," and progressive politics were central to Croly’s theoretical positions and to the wider development of what is now often called “reform liberalism.”

Croly’s thought has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. Among the more important works, Eric F. Goldman’s *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (1952) focuses in particular on *The Promise of American Life*. In chapter nine ("Mr. Croly Writes a Book"), Goldman emphasizes (and overstates, I think) Croly’s influence on Theodore Roosevelt. Goldman also strongly emphasizes (again overstating, I think) the influence on Croly’s thought of the Comtean background of his parents.

This strong emphasis on Comtean influences is picked up in Charles Forcey’s *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann and the Progressive Era, 1900–1925*, published in 1961. Forcey portrays the progressive intellectuals as “moths” seeking the flame of political power—and suffering the inevitable disillusionment. However, Forcey’s own cynicism about politics sometimes detracts from his ability to present Croly’s thought in a full fashion.
The most important book on Croly is David W. Levy's 1985 biography, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive.*³ I have relied often on Levy's work, but among a number of disagreements I think that he continues to overstate greatly the influence of Croly's father, David Goodman Croly, and his Comtean beliefs. Despite his subtitle, I think Levy also understates the importance for Croly's thought of his political commitment to the progressive movement.

In short, I think that the full logic of Croly's political thought has not been elucidated in any previous treatment. My objective in this work is to treat Croly as he deserves—that is, as a serious political theorist. I have sought to explain the many influences on his thought and to show how his fundamentally liberal theory evolved through his interaction with the political events of his day. I hope that a deeper knowledge of one of the founders of modern American liberalism will be helpful in clarifying some of the dilemmas faced by liberals in the waning years of the twentieth century.

Every scholar accumulates numerous obligations in the course of research, and this work is no exception. A much earlier and very different version was written as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University under the direction of the late Alpheus T. Mason. I owe much to his wise counsel over the years. Robert K. Faulkner, then of Princeton and now of Boston College, read the dissertation and also very generously gave the current manuscript a very careful reading. His many comments were very useful in helping me clarify my argument. The late John William Ward (who edited *The Promise of American Life* for Bobbs-Merrill) also read the entire manuscript. I'd also like to thank James T. Kloppenberg for his extensive comments on the project. The editors of this series have also made many helpful suggestions, and I would like to thank them for their support.

Various scholars have aided me in uncovering Croly letters and manuscripts. Charles Forcey, formerly of Rutgers University, gave me access to the Eduard C. Lindeman papers, to copies of the Croly–Learned Hand correspondence, and to other notes he made in the course of his own research on Croly. I am also indebted to Fred Ragan and Charles Wrege for other materials. Karolyn Gould, an independent scholar working on a biography of Dorothy Whitney Straight Elmhirst, was extremely helpful with suggestions about material from the 1920s, and I profited greatly from conversations with her. Claire Urion McCully aided me substantially in research on Jane Cunningham Croly, and Karen Huie assisted with the bibliography.

Scholars owe great debts to librarians, and I have been aided by the
staff of my own Wellesley College Library and by librarians at Princeton University, Yale University, Harvard University, the Harvard Law School, Columbia University, Rutgers University, Cornell University, Brandeis University, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and by Robin Johnson, the librarian of Dartington Hall, Totnes, England. Mrs. Elsie Douglas, secretary to the late Justice Felix Frankfurter, gave me access to the Frankfurter Papers when they were still in the Supreme Court (they are now at the Library of Congress), and Donald R. Hiss has given permission to quote from these letters. Norris Darrell also gave permission to quote from the Croly–Learned Hand correspondence.

I also gained useful information from talking or corresponding with several of Croly's associates, including Alvin Johnson, Bruce Bliven, Charles Merz, and Leonard Elmhirst. Michael Young and Kenneth Lindsay also helped with information on Croly's work with the Elmhirsts in the 1920s.

The Leopold Schepp Foundation funded part of this research, and Wellesley College's generous provisions for sabbatical leave were instrumental in allowing completion of the work. The Wellesley College Women's Research Center provided support for research on Jane C. Croly.

Finally, I owe a great debt to my family and especially to my wife, Laura, who has lived with Herbert Croly for as long as she has lived with me!

Needless to say, I am responsible for any errors that remain in this work.

Wellesley, Massachusetts
April 1992
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