Shaping Modern Liberalism

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Years of Preparation

Herbert Croly was born on January 23, 1869. He first achieved public prominence in 1909, at age forty. What happened in those forty years to prepare Croly to write *The Promise of American Life*? What training had he received? What thinking had he done in those years to prepare himself to write such an influential book on his first excursion into politics? The answers to these questions cannot be certain; Croly indicated only a few of the influences on his thought. However, we have information about many aspects of his life in these years, including the influence of his parents, his education at Harvard, and his work in architectural criticism. We also know something about what Croly read, and most important, we know about the society within which he grew to intellectual maturity.

Herbert was the third of five children born to Jane Cunningham Croly and David Goodman Croly. His mother was the more prominent of his parents—indeed, she had a national reputation as a journalist and feminist.

Jane Cunningham Croly was born on December 19, 1829, in England and came to the United States in 1841, settling in Poughkeepsie and later in New York City. In 1855, she began a lifelong career in journalism on the staff of the *Sunday Times* and *Noah's Messenger* (writing under the pseudonym “Jennie June,” which she used for many of her writings for the rest of her life). In 1856, she married David Croly, a reporter for the *Herald*. 
After a brief period on a Rockford, Illinois, paper, which David edited, the Crolys returned to New York and Jane resumed her work on the *Sunday Times* and then on the *New York World*, which her husband also joined. In 1860, she became editor of *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*, retaining this post until 1887 and writing a column in most issues until 1889. She also wrote for a number of other journals, including *Godey's* and the *Home-Maker*. Her work was syndicated, and thus she was read in many parts of the country.

This energetic woman also wrote a number of books. Some of these, like many of her columns, dealt with conventional "women's issues." For example, Jane wrote a cookbook ("a good, practical cook-book" emphasizing simple recipes), which went through a number of editions. In this work, Jennie offered a number of hints about "household management," as well as recipes. Jane Croly also wrote books on knitting and crocheting and on needlework. Some of her more domestic *Demorest's* columns were also collected in 1864 and published.

However, Jane Croly's interests went well beyond the conventional definition of a woman's place, and her involvement in contemporary political and economic issues was a central part of life in the Croly family. The issue of the suffrage was to become the central question for many women, but that happened slowly. In the years immediately after the Civil War, Jane Croly seems to have generally favored women's suffrage, but without making it her central concern.

For example, in an 1866 *Demorest's* column, in an argument echoed by many suffragists, she observed that the issue had taken on new life with the demand for "negro" suffrage. She asked whether white women were less able politically than negro men. At the same time, she noted as a factual matter that most women did not yet desire the vote. Indeed, Croly argued optimistically that if women really came to want the suffrage, they would gain it: "It is sufficient that few women care for it. If they wanted it, they could have it at once; if half of them wanted it they could have it; if a tenth part of them went to work energetically they could obtain it easily for the whole." When women did vote, it must be on "terms of equality with intelligent American men: it must be, not as a royal gift extended to them by man, but an act of justice—of restitution." Jane Croly thus supported the suffrage without making it her major priority. She was more concerned with the practical economic situation of American women: "The right that women most want in this country is the right to work, without feeling that it is a degradation. . . . Women will work for their husbands without feeling themselves lowered by it; why not for themselves?"

Jane Croly returned to both issues—suffrage and economic independence—at regular intervals in her writings. For example, in an 1875 column she declared that "there is no position in this world which does not
require money." She went on to argue against laws that deprived women of control of their own earnings and inheritances. At the same time, she argued more strongly for the suffrage, claiming that disenfranchising women marked them as inferior or unworthy, whatever the intention of men, and issuing an eloquent plea: "Where, in the domain of thought, can be found an intelligent reason for giving an ignorant man, just landed on our shores, and only one remove from barbarism, the right of suffrage, the right of a voice in the councils of the nation, and refusing it to American women, the mothers of the republic, the cultivated wives and daughters of American men?" Croly rejected the idea that men can reasonably speak for women in politics and concluded that if the state persisted in treating women as wards of men, it had the obligation, at the least, to provide them shelter, education, and employment when men failed to do so.

Several years later, in a book on marriage, Jane Croly tied the suffrage issue to a broader view of women's rights. The "Women's Movement," she argued, was changing domestic relations in fundamental ways. Formerly, women had been content to be subordinate to their husbands, "but the modern theory of individual rights demands that a woman shall be free to live her life as well as a man is." Stating a strongly liberal argument, Jane Croly continued, men's and women's "separate individualities are superior to, instead of subordinated by, the duties and claims of the family." She noted that the "state of warfare" that was sometimes needed to achieve these rights was unfortunate, but was the result of "the appropriative, masterful, and tyrannical spirit of men" and would continue "until justice, or at least partial justice, has been done." She again noted that the ballot would not solve all social problems, but went on to argue that the suffrage movement itself was developing women's abilities: "But the effort to obtain [the vote], to lift themselves to a higher place, to take a part in the public interests and activities of life, will educate and ennoble women."

Jane Croly's feminism was expressed in a different political context in the 1884 presidential election. Writing in *Demorest's* (and noting that she was normally reluctant to mention politics in "the quiet pages of a family magazine"), Jennie June argued that from a woman's point of view it was most appropriate that the issue of Grover Cleveland's fathering of an illegitimate child had been raised in the campaign: "If this is true . . . it is a high compliment to the morality of the age that a crime toward a woman has at last been made a reason why a man should not be available for honorable office, or considered fit to represent loyal men and good citizens." These were strong words for the time.

Jane Croly diverged again from the generally domestic emphasis of *Demorest's* when she devoted an extensive article to "the industrial ques-
tion,” the growing conflicts between capital and labor. Knowing no doubt that her readers would be interested in this question because of the enormous growth of labor unions and labor strife in these years, Croly noted that people were beginning to pay more attention to the quality of work and to the importance of education (both of which she greatly valued), but that these advances would not bear fruit until the “vexed questions in regard to labor” could be solved. This long article briefly reviewed the theories of Owen and Fourier, which Croly felt had failed because they assumed the perfectibility of human beings. Croly recommended instead a cooperative, profit-sharing arrangement developed by a French entrepreneur, Edme Jean Le Claire, who had organized a “Mutual Aid Society” for his workers in 1838. Le Claire had developed pension and life insurance arrangements, as well as placing half the profits of his business in a fund for the workers. In Jane Croly’s view, the success of the plan seemed to prove the power of “associated instead of divided interest.” Le Claire had hastened the “extinction of poverty and pauperism, simply by the application of the co-operative principle between employer and employed” and had revealed that “the great secret was, and is, that each must work for all.” These ideas of a cooperative control of industry would later echo in her son’s writings.

On more specifically feminist issues, Jane undertook her own empirical research on the condition of women in England, France, and Germany during an 1885 trip. She reported that women were taking a more assertive role in all these societies and were winning passage of such legislation as the Women’s Property Act in England, which gave married women the right to their own earnings. She concluded that “women abroad have grown tired of nursing a wretched and dependent gentility, and find the world is as much their oyster as that of a man, if they use it so. The role of the victim has ceased to be interesting, and does not apply to any independent, self-reliant woman.” American women should take note!

Jane Croly also wrote a book to advise the “new woman” who found she had to work (or who wanted to do so). Her message was to work hard and carefully, to pay attention to quality, and especially to demand control of her own resources: “Mind your own business, keep control of your own money affairs . . . and if you have anything to give, give it; do not allow it to be tricked out of you, or give away the most precious result of your efforts—your independence.” In this book, she again considered the larger economic picture. The concentration of business in larger enterprises was “law,” she argued, in words that again could later have been written by her son, and was “the natural result of growth and expansion.” Women had to adapt to these changed economic conditions, just as men did. But workers—men and women—must be aided, as society owed
much to them. Jane argued for “changing [the] working environment, by improving living conditions; by creating and giving access, out of working hours, to libraries, galleries, museums, botanic gardens, and halls where good music can be heard.” She was optimistic that these reforms could be advanced in America as they had been in England.

Jane Croly worked for women’s causes in several areas besides her writings. Most importantly, she was a leader in the women's club movement. Indeed, she is known as the "Mother of Women’s Clubs" to the club movement today. Jane was the moving spirit behind the founding of the women’s club of New York, Sorosis, in 1868. In her specialized field of journalism, Jane Croly also founded the New York Women’s Press Club in 1889. In 1890, Sorosis, under her leadership, took the initiative in establishing the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, which grew rapidly into a major national organization. (By 1896, the General Federation included 1,425 clubs.) Jane Croly also owned and edited the Woman’s Cycle, the journal of the club movement. In her last years, she wrote a vast work (running 1,184 pages), The History of the Woman’s Club Movement in America. In her handwritten dedication, she wrote that the work was intended for the “Twentieth Century Woman by one who has seen, and shared in the struggles, hopes, and aspirations of the woman of the Nineteenth Century.”

For Jane Croly, the women’s club was one way for women to overcome their previous isolation. The club movement brought together women from many backgrounds—from different classes and geographical areas—to perfect within its own membership that unity in diversity which is the basis of its life.” In a letter written just a month before her death on December 23, 1901, she noted that a club should help women develop “the modern co-operative spirit.”

However, the club movement should not only aid the members. One of Jane Croly’s arguments for the establishment of the General Federation was that a national organization would allow a more effective national presence. “There is a vast work for clubs to do throughout the country in the investigation of moral and social questions, in the reformation of abuses, in the cultivation of best influences;—not the influence of class or clique or party, but a wide, liberalizing, educational influence.” Many clubs began to emphasize social problems in the late 1880s, and the establishment of state and local federations enabled them to cooperate on these issues.

What influences, then, could this energetic and prominent woman have had on her son? Herbert rarely wrote about his mother in future years, and it is clear that he was not as close to her as to his father. To some observers, this indicated a lack of maternal concern. Herbert’s wife, Louise
Emory Croly, encouraged this conclusion when she wrote to Felix Frankfurter shortly after Herbert's death that Jane Croly "was very clever, ambitious—and a tremendous worker—and not in the least domestic." Louise judged that her mother-in-law "simply didn't know what it was to be maternal." A partial rebuttal to this picture of Jane Croly can be found in a moving reminiscence that Croly's sister, Vida Croly Sidney, wrote for the Golden Jubilee of Sorosis. She remembered attending meetings with her mother and recalled Sunday teas and dinners with Jane's friends visiting their home. Vida also pointed out that Jane "ran a large house, superintended the care of four children," and that she "carried on a voluminous correspondence with many friends."

Maternal care aside, what might Herbert Croly have learned from his mother? Living with Jane Croly, he would have been encouraged—even forced—to develop an interest in political and social issues. Strangely, Herbert never showed any particular interest in women's issues, but his mother's concern for individual rights, an important concept in liberal political thought, was surely impressed on him. Jane Croly's interest in economic issues and her rejection of both laissez-faire and radical socialism were no doubt suggestive to her son. Her emphasis on the possibilities of cooperative endeavors to solve "the industrial question," and her club emphasis on "unity in diversity," would have encouraged in him a sense of social solidarity. Jane's concern to use the General Federation as a political pressure group for a broad range of social reforms would also have communicated a public-spirited concern for social improvement. The large numbers of visitors (both men and women) who came to tea or dinner would have opened the mind of the young man at home. Finally, a basic influence is surely Jane's concern to solve current social issues through writing about them.

Herbert Croly's father encouraged him in many of the same directions, including the career of journalism. David Goodman Croly was born in Ireland in 1829 and came to the United States while still an infant. After his marriage, and the brief experiment in Rockford, David Croly became first city editor and then managing editor of the New York World, a new, strongly Democratic paper. David held this position until late 1872 and was presumably fully involved in local and national politics. He then joined another new paper, the Daily Graphic, and continued as editor there until 1878.

In 1868, while on the World, David Croly became involved in a project that provided important financial support for him and later for Herbert. With an associate, he founded the Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide,
which summarized real estate transactions in the rapidly growing New York market. Croly wrote for the Record and Guide for several years, giving up an active involvement in 1873, but rejoining in 1880. From then until his death in 1889, he wrote a weekly column, “Our Prophetic Department,” in which he commented on a wide range of economic—and political—issues.28

Like his wife, David Croly wrote a number of books while engaged in daily journalism. A notable early work, published anonymously in 1864, was Miscegenation, in which Croly probably coined the term. This work seemed to approve of racial intermarriage: the author claimed to muster the forces of “Christianity, democracy, and science” to “teach that a people to become great, must become composite.”29 However, the book was a hoax, designed to stir up Northern anxieties about race relations for the benefit of the Democratic party in the election of 1864.30 Like many Democrats, indeed many Americans, of the period, David Croly was something of a racist, and this view, too, would influence his son.

David’s more nonpolitical projects included a book, The Truth about Love, drawn from Croly’s World writings, which argued for considerably freer sexual practices than were common.31 Late in his life, he also collected some of his Guide prophecies into Glimpses of the Future, which he noted was “to be read now and judged in the Year 2000.”32 David Croly also founded a periodical in the early 1870s, with the boast that it was neither a monthly nor a quarterly, but “a periodical with no assured periodicity.” Each article in this unique journal was published on paper of a different color, with type of various sizes and ink of various tints.33 Two or three issues appeared.

Jane Croly wrote of her husband that “he hated the obvious way of saying or doing a thing. He cultivated the ‘unexpected’ almost to a fault, and always gave a touch of originality even to the commonplace.”34 Years later, Herbert echoed this judgment: “He was a man of enormous fertility of mind. He could, I think, originate more ideas in less time than any man I ever met.” Even the loyal son was forced to admit, however, that “his disposition to criticize his own ideas was not as well developed as his power of originating them.”35

The cause that most inspired David Croly was the advancement in the United States of the philosophy of Auguste Comte. Early in their life together, Jane Croly seems to have been committed to Comte’s Positivism also, and Herbert later wrote that he had been baptized into the Comtean “Religion of Humanity” as a child.36 Jane’s commitment to positivism was apparently somewhat transient, but David remained a strong partisan for the rest of his life.37
The most complete expression of David Croly's positivism was a book, *A Positivist Primer*, of 1871, in which he tried to make Comtean ideas accessible to Americans. In this work, David Croly presented an optimistic picture of the "religion of humanity." The human condition, he wrote, "is constantly growing better, constantly improving, and its future will be as much more glorious than its present as its present is superior to its past, and that this may be accomplished, depends entirely upon the willing activities of those who now form the visible side of her existence." Reflecting the Comtean rejection of traditional religion, he wrote: "The only heaven that we recognize is the heaven that can be realized on this earth by intelligent human effort." This religion of humanity would "set to work, consciously to subordinate this egoism, as he [Comte] called it, to unselfishness or altruism." To the convinced positivist follower, this "perpetual act of devotion to our fellow-men" was "no mere sentiment generated by an illusory enthusiasm, but ... a scientific verity, a fact."

For David Croly, society was an organism, and individuals were not free and independent agents. "The peculiarity of our whole scheme of man's life ... is that we regard humanity as a whole, and reject the so-called sovereignty of the individual. The individual, with us, is an abstraction—he does not exist, he is a mere cell in the entire organism." From this argument he derived an ugly metaphor: "The bees in the hive represent the Positivist conception of government; if it is necessary for the good of the hive that the drones should be killed, killed they must be; they but live for the community, the community does not exist for them." In David Croly's understanding of the Comtean scheme, government was to arise out of the people and was to act strictly in support of the collective good. But if it was government of and for the people, it was not government by them, as actual control was to be exercised by an elite "composed mainly of the philosophers, scientists, and artists."

Finally, in the field of economics, David Croly joined his wife in observing that "in noting the progress of modern society, one remarkable tendency has not escaped us. It is the great concentration of wealth into few hands, this tendency to concentration keeping pace with its aggregation. ... It is our belief that nothing can stop this tendency of wealth to concentrate in individual hands." It must be controlled, then, by a power "which we now vaguely apprehend as public opinion. We know how powerful this is, even in its present unorganized state. ... A Vanderbilt, fifty years from now, will be an impossibility." This belief, that economic power needed to be controlled by public opinion, and thus by government, was crucial in Herbert's later elaboration of reform liberalism.

David Croly continued to express these arguments for the next two
decades, and he particularly tried to communicate his Comtean enthusiasm to Herbert, who recalled after his father’s death in 1889:

From my earliest years it was his endeavor to teach me to understand and believe in the religion of Auguste Comte. One of my first recollections is that of an excursion to Central Park on one bright Sunday afternoon in the spring; there, sitting under the trees he talked to me on the theme which lay always nearest his heart—that of the solidarity of mankind. There never, indeed, was a time throughout my whole youth, when we were alone together, that he did not return to the same text and impress upon me that a selfish life was no life at all... His desire to impress upon me a belief which he held himself with all the force of a religious conviction led him to attempt explanations which the mind of a child could neither grasp nor retain. He even discussed, for my benefit, theoretical questions as to the existence and nature of the Supreme Being; discussions, of course, that I could so little understand that it was like pouring water on a flat board... I should have full opportunity to compare the Positivist Grand Etre with the Christian Cross. Under such instruction it was not strange that in time I dropped insensibly into his mode of thinking, or, more correctly, into his mode of believing.

These family teachings would soon be challenged.

HERBERT'S EARLY formal schooling was in J. H. Morse's English, Classical and Mathematical School for Boys in New York. In 1884, he began to take classes at the City College of New York while living at home. In September 1886, however, Herbert left New York to enroll at Harvard as a freshman special student. In his first year in Cambridge, aside from French and English, Croly took a history course, "Constitutional Government in England and America," and a course in political economy, "The Economic History of Europe and the United States since 1763." Most importantly for his future interests, he enrolled in "The History of Philosophy" with George Herbert Palmer and "Logic and Psychology" with William James.

Herbert kept in close touch with his family and particularly his father. Several years later, he wrote to his fiancée, Louise Emory, that "[I] used to send him packets of thirty or forty pages every other day—which he used to answer with marvelous regularity and unfailing kindness in spite of the fact that he detested letter-writing. My own letters I have destroyed; his I have kept, but I never have the courage to read them." Louise did read
them after Herbert's death, and she gathered some of David Croly's letters together as a record of these years.

The early letters were full of typical, if severe, fatherly advice: "Do try and form methodical habits." "Be careful not to get tangled up with young women of any kind." And a message from the practical Jane: "Your mother still finds fault with your penmanship. It is not legible from a printer's point of view." But it was soon clear that more serious issues were at stake: Herbert was straying from the fatherly teaching: "My Dear Boy—you said something about the divergence between my ideas and those of the philosophers whose works you are reading at College," David wrote in late October. "Let me beg of you to form your own judgment on all of the higher themes—religion included—without any reference to what I may have said. All I ask is that you keep your mind open and unpredisposed." At the same time, however, the father urged an extensive reading list on his son, one heavily weighted with Comteans. David recommended that Herbert read Harriet Martineau's translation of Comte, the works of Comte's English editor, Frederick Harrison, and no fewer than three other English positivists. David Croly also recommended Herbert Spencer, arguing that Herbert would note Spencer's debt to Comte. Perhaps most significant, he asked Herbert to read John Stuart Mill's "Estimate of Comte's Life and Works" (including as well a positivist rebuttal of Mill).

David Croly continued to urge Mill on Herbert, and when he likely took the advice, the result must have been eye-opening, for in Mill's commentary on Comte, Herbert Croly would have encountered one of the most devastating philosophical critiques ever written. Mill's *Auguste Comte and Positivism* distinguishes between Comte's early work, primarily derived from the *Cours de philosophie positive* of 1830-1842, and the "later speculations of M. Comte," primarily the *Système de politique positive* of 1851-1854. Mill writes approvingly of major parts of the early work—the logic, the theory of the sciences, and the philosophy of history. However, he is satirically critical of the political system proposed in the early work and even more savagely critical of the moral theory, and particularly the "Religion of Humanity," of the late work. Mill's treatment of Comte's disciples, especially those who resolutely followed the master to a number of absurd positions, would probably have been particularly painful to Herbert.

We don't know that Herbert Croly read Mill. But it is clear that his horizons were greatly widened at Harvard, even as a freshman and sophomore. It seems apparent that as he thought about philosophy and read more widely, Herbert rejected a narrow Comtean focus. He would also have realized from reading Mill and other works that his father’s Comte-
anism was not fully representative of Comte's theory, emphasizing more fully the religious views than the logic or scientific aspects of the theory. Herbert made this evolution clear in the testimonial he wrote in 1889 after his father's death. After having noted that he had fallen into David's "mode of believing," he added:

While I was at college I was surrounded by other influences, and while retaining everything that was positive and constructive in his teaching, I dropped the negative cloth in which it was shrouded. My change in opinion was a bitter disappointment to him, as several letters which he wrote at the time testify. But intense as was his disappointment, it never took the form of a reproach. This is very remarkable when we consider what an essential part of his character his beliefs constituted.\(^5\)

This comment seems to say that it was especially the Comtean religion that Herbert rejected in his first years at Harvard, but it also suggests a more thorough questioning of his father's assumptions.

This process of Herbert's intellectual redefinition was gradual, however, and David Goodman Croly continued to press his views. In early November 1886, for instance, he wrote: "Do not become bewitched by brilliant or showy paradoxes. Reject anything that runs counter to the common sense of the average man. There was something in your long letter recently received about the 'becoming' which had a flavour of Hegel. Beware of metaphysics, my son. We live in a real world and should not be fooled by words." In the spring, he asked whether it is "worthwhile to thoroughly understand Descartes, Spinoza or any of the metaphysical philosophers? The ones to be constantly studied, to my mind, are Kant, Hume, Berkely [sic], J. S. Mill, H. Spencer, but life is too short to master the unfruitful thinkers such as Hegel."\(^52\)

David Croly also gave advice on politics and economics to his son. He urged: "Do not commit yourself against state socialism. There is a good deal to be said for government ownership of natural monopolies, such as telegraph, railroad, etc."\(^53\) He doubted that Herbert would get proper training in these fields: "I almost dread your going through a course of Political Economy at Harvard, the theories which prevail there are . . . a quarter of a century behind the age."\(^54\) He asked if Herbert would prefer to spend a term at Johns Hopkins instead: "I judge there is more advanced thinking among the professors there than at Harvard."\(^55\) David also urged his son to take up the study of sociology (the last of the sciences, according to Comte), noting that "so far the foundation of this noblest of sciences has not been laid. Why not make it the work of your
life? ... Society is an organism controlled by laws of development which when discovered can be modified by man himself. Here is a career for you, my son, a noble one." 56  

These letters are also revealing of the personal circumstances of father and son. Perhaps realizing that he was by now quite ill, David Croly thanked Herbert for returning some money, adding: "Realizing the shortness of my own life I care nothing for the money myself ... nor am I anxious to pile it up for you and your sisters as I hope you will have an honorable ambition to make your own living." 57  

In his second year at Harvard (1887-1888), Herbert began to develop an interest in religion, taking a course in comparative religion (which apparently focused on Christianity). His major work was again in political economy and philosophy. 58  

The basic political economy course was taught by J. Laurence Laughlin in the first semester and Frank W. Taussig in the second. 59 Laughlin (1850–1933) had just brought out an edition of Mill’s Principles of Political Economy, which the students presumably read. He had also recently prepared a short book, The Study of Political Economy: Hints to Students and Teachers, about how to study the subject. This work probably formed the basis of his own teaching. In it, Laughlin recommends the standard works of classical economists, but also critics of that approach (for example, Henry George—though not Karl Marx). 60 The recommended approach is historical, and Laughlin emphasizes that the Civil War has brought major changes in the American economy. He attacks socialism as a doctrine, but recommends using socialist writings in classes. 61 The major point of the book is that dramatic changes in the nation’s economy have created the need for the study of economics, presumably urging his students to take up the challenge. Laughlin also emphasizes the connections of economics to the law, to the ministry, and to journalism, emphasizing the latter’s influence on public opinion. 62 Overall, Laughlin seems to have been fairly conservative in his economics, but his emphasis on the need for different points of view, his emphasis on the rate of change in American society, and his praise of journalism as a career might well have made his sophomore listener pay attention.  

Frank Taussig (1859–1946) was younger, just at the start of a long and illustrious career at Harvard. His area of expertise was the tariff and international economics. Most of his writings came later, and it is difficult to estimate what he taught in the spring of 1888. One evaluation of his overall career emphasizes his sympathy to English classical economics, but also his own theoretical innovations on that tradition. 63 Another judgment, by Joseph Schumpeter, is that Taussig’s writings on wages and capital grew out of a new current in American economics that was running
strongly in the 1880s, and Schumpeter identifies this work with that of Francis A. Walker and John B. Clark. Yet another estimate, by Talcott Parsons, emphasizes Taussig's search for a "middle path" between the dogmatism of left and right, and Parsons judges the work "ethically and politically in the best traditions of a tolerant liberalism, which above all was not deaf to the cry for social justice and the corresponding indictment of certain features of the existing order. . . . Professor Taussig has been in his generation the leading exponent of the same admirable tradition as John Stuart Mill." Parsons went on to note that the growth of state control over the economy was accepted by Taussig, but that he had been concerned with the "extreme difficulty, especially perhaps under modern democratic conditions, of guaranteeing that this control shall in fact be used impartially."

Harvard's economists thus exposed Herbert Croly to classical economics, but also to new approaches and new questions as their discipline changed rapidly in the 1880s. Most important, the work with Taussig probably encouraged Croly to connect economic questions with broader moral and political issues.

David Croly remained skeptical about this preparation: "What I dread is that your political economy course will give you a bias towards believing that what is, is right. You ought to reread Comte on Political Economy in his Positive Philosophy. You should also read Bridges, Marx and the Socialist writers, not that they are right but that they are the most recent studies on the wealth and labour problems."

David Croly also had doubts about Herbert's work in philosophy, which included "English Ethics" with Palmer, and a course in "Monism and the Theory of Evolution in Their Relation to the Philosophy of Nature" with Josiah Royce. David Croly seems to have been particularly bothered by the former: "I am just a little dubious as to the wisdom of spending so much effort to set forth the ethical theories of these 17th century moralists. I wish your studies were more in the direction of modern scientific thought." Despite these fatherly doubts, it is clear that Harvard's philosophers and political economists were having a major impact on Herbert Croly's mind.
of the English idealist T. H. Green, noted for his Hegelianism but also for his reformulation of English liberal political theory. His major influence on Croly would probably have been as a teacher rather than an original mind, although it would be very interesting to know if he talked about Green's political theory.

William James was quite the opposite—a searching mind, working out a number of original positions. In his earlier years at Harvard, James had been involved with Charles Peirce and others in working out the origins of pragmatism—the argument that belief must be defined by practice. James was to develop this doctrine in his later Pragmatism (1907), but in the late 1880s he was very much under the influence of Royce on philosophic questions and preferred to teach primarily psychology, which is what Croly took. In the late 1880s, James was at work on The Principles of Psychology (1890). This sprawling work of 1,400 pages covered a wide range of issues, but it did not come to firm conclusions. Rather, as Kuklick argues, James "half-heartedly defended a scientific psychology and a metaphysical idealism, neither of which satisfied him; and he half-heartedly defended a distinction between the two which he did not believe." James was always very open about his own uncertainties, and it is likely that his students were exposed to many diverse arguments in the course of his teaching.

Josiah Royce was the third philosopher with whom Croly studied in this period. His was a powerful mind, espousing an "absolute idealism" and arguing for the centrality of God in human affairs. But Royce also argued a form of voluntarism or free will, showing perhaps one influence that James had on Royce. In 1885, Royce had published his first major work, The Religious Aspect of Philosophy. His religious views assumed a monistic vision of a divine unity, and this was the vision no doubt imparted to Herbert Croly and protested by David Croly. In a later writing, The Problem of Christianity (1913), Royce made this vision more explicitly Christian, arguing that communities (such as the church, but also political bodies) were defined by a particular purpose—that of the church being redemption. This explicitly Christian framework was probably not so clear when Croly first studied with Royce, but the emphasis on unity and on the concepts of community and purpose would have been clear. Croly would use all of these ideas in his own theory.

What was perhaps most apparent to Herbert Croly in 1886–1888 was that Auguste Comte was no longer relevant to modern philosophy. An earlier member of the Harvard department, John Fiske, had attacked Comte and advanced instead Herbert Spencer, but Fiske had not been given a permanent appointment, and by the time Croly came to study philosophy, Comte was simply no longer studied.
Croly left Harvard in June 1888, after his second year. David Croly's health was steadily worsening, and he died less than a year later, in April 1889. In that year, Herbert served as secretary to his father and must have worked with him on the Record and Guide. Some years later, confusing his chronology a bit (or perhaps counting summer vacations), Herbert wrote: "When he was not well, after I left college, I was his constant companion for about three or four years. I used to act as his amanuensis and we used to have long discussions about every aspect of modern literature, economics, and politics. I was very much amused when it suddenly occurred to me after I had written 'The Promise of American Life,' how many of its leading trends of thought I could trace back to these discussions and which were directly promoted by things he had said."79

A number of David Croly's columns in the Record and Guide in the 1880s had commented on the need for government to take a more active role in controlling monopolies. To assume this role, government would need to be reorganized, and this would in turn demand that Americans get over their fear of it. The Jeffersonian heritage of minimal government needed to be abandoned.80 David Croly presumably urged Herbert to adopt these and similar views during their conversations in the last year of his life.

At David Croly's death, Herbert inherited a share in the Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide, and he served as editor and wrote unsigned pieces for the journal for two years, while living at home with his mother and sisters. These editorial comments addressed a wide range of current social issues, but concentrated particularly on economic questions. One topic was the trusts, which Croly (following both his father and mother) argued were inevitable and were likely to prove beneficial in terms of economic efficiency, though not without dangers to society as well. These dangers, he argued, must be controlled by government.81

An 1890 column advanced a theme that Croly used in many later works—the idea that the modern world had resulted from religious and political revolutions in the last several centuries and was now undergoing an industrial revolution. "That the outcome of [this revolution] will be exactly what either Capital or Labor expects is scarcely probable. Some middle way between the clash of interests will no doubt be found to the advantage of all concerned."82 This search for a "middle way" was a theme familiar to Croly from his mother, probably from his economics course with Taussig, and perhaps from his father. It would be a major theme fifteen years later when Croly sat down to write The Promise of American Life.

But Herbert did not immediately pursue his interest in politics and economics. Instead, the publishers of the Record and Guide started a new
periodical in mid-1891, the Architectural Record, and Herbert joined the staff for a year. His first signed article was a venture (not terribly successful) in popular aesthetics. Croly assured his readers of the value of art ("an indispensable element in the matured and perfect life"). However, displaying a democratic temper probably acquired from his mother and some of his Harvard studies, he was equally sure that art would not be successful apart from a popular and widely shared culture: "If you mistake it to be the patented possession of a cultured few . . . it will make you exacting, finical and even querulous."83

Croly did not immediately continue in his cultural career either, as he was married in May 1892 to Louise Emory. Louise was from an upper-middle-class Baltimore family, and Herbert had met her while he was studying at Harvard and she at what would soon be called Radcliffe College. Herbert and Louise decided that he needed to return to Harvard to finish his education.

In the fall semester of 1892, Herbert again registered for an English course, this time in advanced writing (Croly's later style is convincing evidence of the futility of trying to teach good writing). As before, he concentrated in economics and philosophy.

Louise Croly later wrote that Herbert "was greatly interested in Edward Cummings's course in Social Science."84 Cummings's interests are clear in articles he published in the period in the Quarterly Journal of Economics.85 One topic that he had written about, and that presumably formed a central part of the course, was the role of the state in regulating industry, particularly disputes between capital and labor. In 1887, Cummings had written approvingly of state experimentation in this area (particularly citing commissions in New York and Massachusetts) in enforcing industrial arbitration.86 Some years later, just after Croly took his course, Cummings followed this with another article on national regulation, as under the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887. Cummings wrote approvingly of this development of national power and also of the role that unions played in rationalizing the economic situation.87

Another topic of research was unions themselves. Cummings particularly focused on developments in England, but also compared English unionists to the Knights of Labor. He emphasized that unions performed many benefits for their members and argued that their success was watched with fear by the more "militant socialists" who benefited from industrial strife and despair.88 This moderate position would have appealed to Croly, who had himself argued the year previously for a "middle way" in industrial relations.

Yet another topic that Cummings had researched was cooperative societies in Europe and in America. In an article written two years before
Herbert sat before him, Cummings had summarized the work of European cooperatives. These differed, he explained, some being initiated by unions, others by employers; some of each kind were successful, others not. One of the successful employer cooperatives that Cummings emphasized was the very Maison Leclaire that Jane Croly had written about in 1886. Using virtually her words, Cummings argued that cooperatives were a promising way to solve “the industrial problem.” Cummings’s conclusion was very favorable to cooperatives: “I have no hesitancy in welcoming profit-sharing as the next great phase of industry”; and he called cooperatives a mean between the extremes of laissez-faire and radicalism.

Cummings may also have begun to introduce his students to Fabian socialist thought. This is not reflected in his writings in the early 1890s in particular, but in 1899 he published a long article on Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s writings on British trade unions. The bulk of this article is a factual presentation, but Cummings points out that trade unionists were like all other humans—that there were many points of view expressed in the labor movement. He noted that the Webbs emphasized the nationalization of public services and also the growth of cooperatives and called their theory “the new collectivist philosophy of Trade Unionism, and, incidentally, of society in general.” Cummings left his own evaluation ambiguous, but he did argue that the Webbs were trying to develop a new approach—opposed to classical economics, to “that obsolete abstraction known as the individual,” and also to the “old-fashioned bias” of Karl Marx. Rather, he saw them as emphasizing the “bias of that new and true collectivist socialism.”

These topics that Croly absorbed in Cummings’s classroom would all be suggestive for the future political theorist. Thus it is clear that Croly was taught much more than classical laissez-faire economic theory at Harvard; he was exposed to many of the newer economic currents, most of which emphasized an increased role for the government.

On his return to Cambridge, Croly also took philosophy courses with two of Harvard’s stars, Royce, again, in a course in cosmology, and George Santayana in a course on aesthetics. Santayana had graduated from Harvard in 1886, studied abroad, and then completed a Harvard Ph.D. in 1889, also becoming a faculty member. In his early philosophical positions he was under the influence of James’s psychology and was probably not yet the dominant influence he later became when Walter Lippmann studied in the same department. When Croly was in his class, he was presumably at work on the book published in 1896 as The Sense of Beauty. This work explored the relation between aesthetic sensations and the order imposed on them by our intelligence. Croly, who had already
written on art, was no doubt involved in exploring the more philosophic dimensions of aesthetics.

Croly had returned to Harvard after his marriage with high hopes of graduating in two more years. However, the semester ended disastrously: he had a nervous breakdown just before exams, and again he withdrew from Harvard.97

This breakdown led to the period of Croly's life that we know least about. Herbert and Louise apparently lived in Cambridge and traveled extensively in Europe for the next two years, supported presumably by Jane Croly and/or Louise's parents. They spent summer vacations in Cornish, New Hampshire, and Croly's ties to Cornish were very significant for the rest of his life.98 This was a summer place that attracted a number of writers, artists, and lawyers, and Croly developed an important series of friends there over the next several years, building his own home in Cornish (financed by Jane Croly) as he developed ties to the area. Among his friends in Cornish were Winston Churchill, the novelist, Norman Hapgood and George Rublee, Croly's classmates who later became public figures, and Philip Littell, who later joined Croly on the New Republic. Learned Hand, who became a fast friend, also settled in Cornish.99

In September 1895, Croly returned to Cambridge and again reentered Harvard, finally becoming a regular student in 1897. He took a number of courses in these four years, but probably was not a full-time student, for when he left in 1899, Croly still hadn't been awarded the B.A.100 The degree was finally awarded in 1910, after Croly has become prominent.101

Croly's courses were primarily in philosophy in these years. He again took a course with James, one with Palmer, one with Santayana, and two with Royce.102 This was the period in which James was developing his pragmatic theory further and moving away from Royce's positions. It would have been a stimulating time to study with these two men. For James, of course, pragmatism meant that the "ultimate test" of an idea was the "conduct it dictates or inspires."103 Experience was crucial in verifying consciousness.

Royce was at work on The World and the Individual, delivered first in two series of lectures in 1899 and 1900. It was the "high-water mark of the idealistic tide."104 Royce had become a more explicitly Christian thinker by now. He had also been working on the notion of self-consciousness, and he was attempting a complete reformulation of his views.105 Royce noted in his introduction to the first series of these lectures that after a discussion of God and first principles, he would devote the second series "to the
application of our fundamental conceptions to the more special problems of the nature of the human Ego, the meaning of the finite realm called the Physical World, and the interpretation of Evolution." He continued: "Having thus sketched our Cosmology... we shall conclude the whole understanding by a summary discussion of the problems of Good and Evil, of freedom, of immortality, and of the destiny of the Individual, still reviewing our problems in the light of our general conception of being."

In the two courses he took with Royce in these years, Croly must have been exposed to many aspects of this argument, and he must have watched Royce try to work out his combination of a religiously inspired monistic vision with a sense of the worth of the individual. Royce thought he had proven that such a combination was possible as he made clear in his inspirational close to the first series of lectures: "Therefore are you in action Free and Individual, just because the unity of the divine life, when taken together with the uniqueness of this life, implies in every finite being just such essential originality of meaning as that of which you are conscious. Arise then, freeman, stand forth in thy world. It is God's world. It is also thine." For Royce, these words were a philosophic reconciliation of individual consciousness and a Christian idealism; for Croly, they might already have had more specifically political implications.

Croly's courses in 1895-1899 pointed toward a career in philosophy: in addition to courses in the department, he undertook language preparation in German, in Semitic, and in Greek. However, he also took some more economics, including another course with Cummings, a course in literary criticism, and a course in fine arts with Charles Eliot Norton. Finally, he took a course in Christian theology in the Divinity School and three courses in the History Department in Christian thought and the history of Christianity. This study of Christianity probably put a final end to the Comtean religious theories that Croly had been taught by his father and may also have set the stage for his greatly expanded interest in religion after the First World War. However, in the short run, Herbert's career at Harvard ended abruptly and finally in the spring of 1899, when the Crolys sailed again for Europe, perhaps for Herbert to study philosophy, although it is not clear he ever did.

Fourteen years later, Croly wrote (rather dishonestly) to Felix Frankfurter, whom he had met not long before, that he had "lived in Cambridge for six years as a graduate student with the intention of becoming an instructor in philosophy." He claimed, however, that he found Cambridge "illiberal and petty. ... While I retained my interest in philosophy itself, the work of a teacher made no appeal." Much later, Croly wrote in private that he had left Harvard and philosophy because he had found
himself “the victim of an incoherent eclecticism” and had been unable to work out his own original views among the many influences of his teachers.111

Kuklick’s research puts Croly’s situation in a wider perspective. In previous years, philosophy had encouraged generalists, and even amateur philosophers could be influential. The Ph.D. was also relatively rare. But “by 1900 philosophy was the activity of the professor.” Specialized, technical work was becoming the norm.112 James, Royce, and others of their generation continued to speak to wider concerns, but among the younger members of the profession this public interest and wide scope was becoming rare.113 Without even a B.A., and with more general interests than a specialized training, Croly was unlikely to get anywhere in philosophy, and he must have realized that in 1899.

His years at Harvard had thus taught Croly much—in history and religion, and particularly in economics and philosophy. Many parallels can be drawn between his studies and his later political theory. But Croly’s mind was by no means fully formed in 1899. Harvard had not set Croly in any one direction; rather, he had many different intellectual experiences on which to draw as he turned again to a career in journalism.

The years from 1899, when he left Harvard, to 1905, when he began The Promise of American Life, to 1909, when it was published, are the years in which Herbert Croly grew to full intellectual maturity. He had turned away from a career in philosophy and had become a “man of letters” in New York. He was on his own intellectually, and personally as well, after the death of his mother in late 1901.

Croly’s writing in this period was largely in the Architectural Record, though he wrote a few pieces for other magazines. Most of the Architectural Record articles were essentially technical pieces, reviewing recent buildings (“New Theatres of New York,” “The Finest Store in the World,” “Three New Hotels”) or new techniques in building. Croly also published two books on the architecture of personal dwellings in this period.114 Croly supported himself with this writing and indeed continued to write for the Architectural Record until his death, though at a greatly reduced pace after 1909.

It would be nice to know more about Croly’s thoughts in these years, but there are no letters surviving from the period. However, we can see the direction of his thinking in some of the less technical pieces in the Architectural Record. Several of these mention another influence on his thinking, a novel, Unleavened Bread115 by Robert Grant, which was pub-
lished in 1900 and which Croly must have read soon after. Croly attested to the importance of Grant's novel in 1910, in a short article he wrote regarding the purpose of *The Promise:*

The idea which lies at the basis of "The Promise of American Life" first occurred to me about ten years ago, during a reading of Judge Robert Grant's novel "Unleavened Bread." In that story the author has ingeniously wrought out the contradiction subsisting between certain aspects of the American democratic tradition and the methods and aspirations which dominate contemporary American intellectual work.116

This was the only influence that Croly mentioned in the article. He also acknowledged the debt to Grant directly, when he later wrote asking him to submit material for the *New Republic:* "You already know how much I owe you personally and how extremely important to the development of my own point of view the reading of your novel 'Unleaven Bread' [sic] was."117

*Unleavened Bread* must have appealed to Croly for several reasons, some of them personal. A lot of the action takes place in women's clubs (one scene even at a meeting of the General Federation, founded by Jane Croly ten years earlier), and he would have been familiar with some of the character types (Croly mentions women's clubs in a number of his own writings). Also, part of the novel is set in New York, with the characters buying new real estate "uptown" and trying to decide where the fashionable neighborhoods would be, matters that Croly was familiar with from the *Record and Guide.* More important, a major figure is an architect, Wilbur Littleton, who is committed to work of good quality. He prefers to build honest public buildings such as schools and churches, but his clients usually prefer vulgar residences and the flaunting of private wealth. Worse yet, Wilbur's wife, Selma (the protagonist), sides with the clients in her desire to make money and "get ahead" in the world.

Croly mentioned this novel in several of his articles in the years 1901–1905. One article was a full review in which he argues that Selma, this "troublesome woman," believes that "in a democracy the only qualifications which a specialist needs for his special tasks are untutored enthusiasm, common sense, and a keen eye for the main chance."118 In Grant's novel, Selma, and not her husband, was the representative American, and Croly criticized the American national tradition "which resents exclusive technical standards and refuses to trust the men who by their thorough training have earned the right authoritatively to represent such standards." Croly would amplify his own view about how standards of qual-
ity and specialization could be reconciled with democracy in *The Promise*.

Grant had set his reader thinking, and in another article Croly pronounced *Unleavened Bread* "a novel which throws much more light upon current social tendencies than any American story recently published." Some of the questions in Herbert Croly's mind had to do with the place of culture in American democracy. In his own writings on architecture (perhaps drawing on his work with Santayana), he echoed Wilbur Littleton's complaint: buildings were too often commissioned by tasteless millionaires, and architects were lulled or beaten into accepting materialistic values. Similarly in literature, the average author tried "to be contemporary, representative, popular and vital" more than "well-fashioned, well-observed or well-considered." In short, "while Americans are very much interested in works of art, they have little instinctive love either of the work or the art."

An obvious solution was to divorce art and democracy, and Croly played with this idea: "That the plastic arts in a modern democratic community can ever be both genuinely popular and thoroughly self-respecting is at least a very dubious question." Yet in aesthetics—and, as we shall see, in politics as well—Croly rejected this solution, held back by a commitment to democracy, or at least to its possibilities, and by his earlier judgment that an art that lost touch with popular culture would become effete and "querulous."

But how then could the artist achieve true excellence while retaining popular appeal? To this question, in one formulation or another, Croly returned again and again, in politics as in art. Croly was optimistically uncertain about the possibilities:

> It is by no means necessary to draw an inference . . . that American art will always remain at cross purposes with popular life. The modern national democratic society is a new thing under the sun. Its potentialities are only beginning to be vaguely foreshadowed, and if such an enlarged community can ever get fairly under way, if its numbers can ever become closely united by some dominant and guiding tradition, there is no telling what may come of it. Such a vast source of energy, properly concentrated and guided, might accomplish—well, I do not, at any rate, know what it might not accomplish . . . All that is, however, a matter of speculation, almost of faith.

In this 1901 article, written for an architectural periodical, Croly already seems more interested in politics than in art. In his reliance on the American people becoming "united by some dominant and guiding tradition,"
we have an appearance of a major point of *The Promise* and of two concepts central to that work, national community and national purpose. Moreover, Croly has already effected the combination of nationalism and democracy ("modern national democratic society") that is such a central part of the later argument.

Croly amplified these points over the next several years. For example, in 1903, he called for the "infusion of a national organic spirit into the culture" of America, defining this spirit as "the existence of a communicating current of formative ideas and purposes which makes the different part[s] of the social body articulate, and which stamps the mass of its works with a kindred spirit and direction." In a review of Henry James's work, he wrote that "intellectual work of any kind derives much of its momentum and effect from the extent to which it embodies and fulfills a national purpose and tradition." Croly was optimistic about these nationalizing tendencies: as early as June 1902, he wrote that politics and business were undergoing the needed transformation; culture had only to follow: "What the United States needs is a nationalization of their intellectual life comparable to the nationalizing, now under way, of their industry and politics."

Croly's call for a "national organic spirit" certainly reflects the influence of Royce, and perhaps of Comte as well. But it is clear in these *Architectural Record* pieces that Croly was becoming more and more interested in specifically political events. Indeed, when he refers to the "nationalizing" of American industry and politics, it seems clear that he is referring to progressivism. Croly was responding to the national sense that the fabric of American life was rapidly changing in this period—that a new nation was emerging, and that changes were needed in many areas. Industry had developed national trusts in the matter of a few years, and under Theodore Roosevelt's leadership the political system was starting to respond. But where was the "nationalization of intellectual life" to come from, not only in art but also in the more basic philosophic assumptions about American culture in its broadest sense? Croly clearly set out to provide this intellectual program in 1905 when he sat down to write *The Promise of American Life*.

But before examining that work, we should note that there were other aspects of *Unleavened Bread* besides the architectural connection that made Croly think about politics. Grant raised additional issues that were central to the progressive questioning of American life and to Croly's own developing concerns.

A variant on Grant's question of how specialists fit into American culture was his more basic question of what was "truly American" in taste and social values. Grant's characters asked this question often, and
all of them valued "American originality." But they couldn’t easily define "American." Nor could many Americans easily answer this question in an age when the economy was being transformed before their eyes, when their country had become an international power and had acquired an empire in McKinley’s “glorious little war,” and when immigration was changing the character of the American population.  

Grant also explored issues of social class. The Littletons (Wilbur and his sister, who becomes president of a new women’s college) are of “gentle stock.” They are middle-class people who are offended by the flashy tastes and superficiality of the nouveau riche businessmen and their wives. This resentment can be compared to the “status consciousness” that Richard Hofstadter has argued was characteristic of progressivism. Many other historians agree that most progressives were usually “old stock” Americans from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds.  

Grant’s novel is an extensive satire of the tastes of “fashionable” society, one of many such works at the time. For example, reading Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, a best-seller in the year Croly started work on *The Promise*, would have recalled a number of Grant’s themes in his mind. The contemporary progressive sociologist Thorstein Veblen also explained the behavior of businessmen like Grant’s or Wharton’s in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), arguing that wealthy people displayed their social position by such “conspicuous consumption” as that satirized by Grant.

The society of *Unleavened Bread* was thus characterized by growing social divisions, which challenged “the original [American] ideal ... the illusion that extremes of social condition do not exist.” Rather, “society here is divided into sets.” Thus Grant was suggesting that the American ideals of equality and fair play and of a common community had been lost; many progressives agreed.

Grant’s most obviously political message came in the third part of the novel, in the person of Selma’s third husband, Lyons, who is a businessman turned politician. He is extremely successful in politics, elected to Congress, to the governorship, and eventually to the U.S. Senate. But he is also a windbag who (with Selma’s encouragement) compromises his own ethical code by taking money from a businessman who wants favorable treatment for his utility company. This entire section of the novel portrays businessmen as unscrupulous and politicians as corrupt, perhaps especially during financial panics, which are shown to be part and parcel of the free enterprise system. The criticism of unregulated laissez-faire practices is crystal clear, as is Grant’s call for honorable government regulators and officials.

The corruption of politics by business, and of business itself, was of