Shaping Modern Liberalism

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Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought.

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course a central concern for many progressives. The muckrakers were in the process of sensitizing the American public to precisely the sort of abuses that Grant described—as in Ida Tarbell’s exposé of Standard Oil (1904), Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), and especially David Graham Phillips’s *Treason of the Senate*, the first installment of which appeared in 1906. Richard L. McCormick has shown that the mid-1900s were crucial in the development of progressivism. In New York, for example, a legislative commission with Charles E. Hughes as counsel had exposed the corruption in the utilities industry in 1905. Another investigation into the life insurance industry in the fall of 1905 uncovered the corrupt involvement of Senator Tom Platt and other politicians. These events, in McCormick’s view, “pointed to a corrupt alliance between the corporations and all classes of politicians.”135 Living in New York, Croly would have been acutely aware of these developments in the years when he set to work on *The Promise*.

Robert Grant didn’t advance many solutions to these problems in his novel, but he did suggest a few directions. For example, a “Reform Club” of the better citizens is organized and tries to introduce a better quality of life into Benham, Grant’s fictional city.136 One of their proposals is to move to an appointed rather than an elected school board, so that qualified individuals (“specialists”) can serve, perhaps an intriguing suggestion to the Croly who later came to rely on appointed bureaucracies. As an alternative to “reform,” Grant has socialists make a brief appearance to begin to raise embarrassing questions about Lyons’s political dealings. Perhaps the message was that if moderate reform didn’t succeed, more radical solutions would be sought.

Grant’s novel was thus about a lot more than art and architecture. The “current social tendencies” that Croly thought Grant discussed so well involved fundamental issues in American culture and in the American political, economic, and social systems. Many people were beginning to address these issues, and under the inspiration of an activist president a national reform movement was developing. As George Mowry writes, “change was in the air by 1906.”137 *Unleavened Bread* certainly helped Croly focus his ideas, but living in the midst of the developing progressive movement was no doubt what inspired him. Drawing on his own training and education, and on his own mind, he set out to join the progressive debate.
A desire to address Robert Grant's concern that specialized work was not properly appreciated or encouraged in American culture may have been the proximate cause of Croly's decision to write *The Promise of American Life*. However, once begun, the task grew: "I soon found myself confronted with a much bigger task than I anticipated." The "attempt to justify the specialized contemporary intellectual discipline" that Grant desired led to "the far more complicated and dubious task of giving a consistent account of the group of methods, conventions, and ideas which have been gradually wrought into the fabric of American national self-consciousness." The American people, wrote this architectural critic, needed to be convinced that "the house of the American democracy demands thoroughgoing reconstruction."  

Croly's attempt to make a convincing case for "reconstruction" led him to write an important and original work of political theory. To Walter Lippmann, Croly's book was "the political classic which announced the end of the Age of Innocence with its romantic faith in American destiny," establishing its author as "the first important political philosopher who appeared in America in the twentieth century." "Reconstruction" required that Croly give a historical explanation of the origins of contemporary dilemmas such as those Grant had identified, but it also demanded, as it turned out, the elucidation in the American progressive context of central concepts of political theory, such as nationalism, democracy, equality, freedom, and individualism. Moreover, in his attempt to ground his analysis in concrete examples, and to make practical suggestions for re-
form, Croly came to deal at length with a number of specific policy questions concerning the American political and economic systems and to comment at length on the programs and personalities of the emerging reform movement. It was these specific proposals that probably attracted the most immediate attention for Croly’s book, but in the long term it has been his historical analysis and his theoretical discussions that have been the more important parts of the work.

**THE PROMISE** begins with the argument that Americans need to reject laissez-faire theory and accept the idea of national planning to ensure the “better future.” This central argument leads to Croly’s theoretical concerns and also to his practical suggestions. At first, however, he is concerned with locating his argument in American history.

Croly admits at once that his message is an unusual one for Americans. Quoting H. G. Wells’s *The Future in America* and anticipating Lippmann’s later comment, Croly notes that most Americans think easily and often of “national destiny,” but they have been reluctant to conceive that that destiny will not be fulfilled automatically. Clearly evoking the “Manifest Destiny” optimism of the 1840s, Croly agrees with the popular conception that America does indeed have a bright future, but he argues that this future will not come without work—without organization, intellectual effort, and without making reforms in American society. He therefore rejects “destiny” as an appropriate term for America’s future, as it is too indicative of the traditional American mixture of “optimism, fatalism, and conservatism,” for which he admits “an active and intense dislike.” Rather, he suggests two other words as appropriate terminology: “promise” and “purpose.”

In Croly’s view, a “promise” has to be realized in action, and to be realized it has to be infused with an “ideal” to organize and inspire its followers. Americans may have often thought that their land was one of promise, but they “may never have sufficiently realized that this better future . . . will have to be planned and constructed rather than fulfilled of its own momentum.” Croly hoped that Americans would realize that his point was not completely foreign to their history: “In seeking to disentangle and emphasize the ideal implications of the American national Promise, I am not wholly false to the accepted American tradition.” In fact, he was optimistic that his argument would be accepted. “New conditions” were causing “an increasing number of Americans” to rethink their nation’s promise. The closing of the “virgin wilderness” and the fact that “the Atlantic Ocean has become merely a big channel” were changes bringing home the need for conscious planning, hopefully indicating a
popular willingness to accept an ideal that needed to be worked for rather than simply assumed.

In arguing for substituting "purpose" for "destiny," Croly attacked laissez-faire theory and its economic and social effects head-on and in very strong terms: "The existing concentration of wealth and financial power in the hands of a few irresponsible men is the inevitable outcome of the chaotic individualism of our political and economic organization, while at the same time it is inimical to democracy, because it tends to erect political abuses and social inequalities into a system." He argued that the "peculiar freedom which the American tradition and organization have granted to the individual" has resulted in "political corruption" and "unwise economic organization, and the legal support afforded to certain economic privileges... due to the malevolent social influence of individual and incorporated American wealth." In perhaps his most bitter attack, he denounced laissez-faire thinkers who "enshrine this American democratic ideal in a temple of canting words which serves merely as a cover for a religion of personal profit."

The political result of these abuses was that "a numerous and powerful group of reformers has been collecting whose whole political policy and action is based on the conviction that the 'common people' have not been getting the Square Deal to which they are entitled under the American system; and these reformers are carrying with them a constantly increasing body of public opinion."

Clearly identifying himself with progressive reform and the attack on corruption in business and politics, and with the 1904 Square Deal campaign of the popular president who had just left office, Croly issued an intellectual call to arms: "The redemption of the national Promise has become a cause for which the good American must fight. ... The American idea ... must be propagated by the Word and by that right arm of the Word, which is the Sword." The doctrine of Croly's cause, of the "word" which he presumed to substitute for Manifest Destiny, was "national democracy" —the combination of nationality and democracy, of the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian traditions in American thought, that is probably the most famous part of his book. Croly hoped that his "constructive relation" of these two ideals would be "in truth equivalent to a new Declaration of Independence."

Before we turn to that combination, however, it may be useful to consider further how Croly came to emphasize the concepts of "promise" and "purpose" that underlie this argument. Where did Croly's faith in a national promise, a common purpose, come from? One answer is simply the events of the time. Croly was attacking laissez-faire theory, the policy of nonintervention in the economy, because he perceived (as so many
Americans did) that it had allowed dramatic changes to occur in American society. In positing a national interest superior to individual selfish interests, he was clearly inspired by the practical example of Theodore Roosevelt, who had articulated the notion of the public interest when, as president, he successfully arbitrated the anthracite coal strike or when he prosecuted the Northern Securities Company under the Sherman Act. Roosevelt's "Square Deal" was a slogan meant to assure all Americans that they would be fairly treated. Croly thought Roosevelt's previous program inadequate, but it did embody the precise combination of democracy and nationalism that he was proposing: Roosevelt's "devotion both to the national and to the democratic ideas is thorough-going and absolute." 13

However, while the concept of a national purpose was clearly opposed to laissez-faire, it is important to note that it was also clearly opposed to any "class-based" ideal, and specifically to socialism. In short, Croly was seeking a "middle-way" between ideological extremes, and he was quite conscious of this intention. The "idea of a constructive relationship between nationality and democracy," he wrote, was "flexible." "It is not a rigid abstract and partial ideal, as is that of an exclusively socialist or an exclusively individualist democracy. Neither is it merely a compromise... between individualism and socialism." 14 Croly was clearly trying to create an American ideology that would inspire reform, and it had to be an ideology that appealed to the whole people rather than to any group or class. I believe that this is one element that identifies Croly's thought as liberal from the start, for historically liberal political theory has rejected a class analysis. 15

Croly was responding to the divisions between capital and labor at the time. However, emerging divisions in American society went even deeper than that. Richard McCormick has pointed out that a host of different interests were organizing in the late 1890s. 16 Professional groups, trade associations, more specialized unions—interest groups were becoming more common and more assertive. Croly had first-hand experience with these forces, as in his mother's organization of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in part for lobbying purposes. In The Promise, he was attempting to counter this trend and assert instead the ideal of a single, unified national interest. The high level of immigration at the time may also have encouraged Croly to emphasize the need for a common national purpose.

Additionally, we have seen that Croly's own writings on architecture and American culture, and his reading of Grant's novel, had left him wondering what was distinctively "American." Some ideal was necessary to replace the materialistic ethos so characteristic of modern America. In
The Promise he reached back into American history to find principles that could form the basis of a transformed American culture.

There is another important influence, I think, on Croly's search for a national purpose, and that is the idealism of Josiah Royce. Royce had emphasized unity—a unity of God and man in creation, but also a unity both within and among different "communities," such as churches and particularly nations. For Royce, humans should have a loyalty to their community. Croly had absorbed this teaching from Royce in several classes, but Royce made it even more explicit in a work published the year before Croly's Promise. In 1908, Royce wrote that "a spiritual unity of life, which transcends the individual experience of any man, must be real. . . . If loyalty is right, social causes, social organizations, friendships, families, countries, yes, humanity . . . must have the sort of unity of consciousness . . . upon a higher level than that of our ordinary human individuality." In 1909, Croly applied this idealism to a more political arena and argued more specifically for a national ideal. The specifically national focus was Croly's, as Royce had affirmed loyalties to many levels of society ("social organizations," "families," "countries"), but the call for an ideal, a purpose transcending the individual, was derived in part from Royce. For Croly as for Royce, this was a spiritual cause: individuals were to be lifted above their selfish and material interests by a commitment to a higher ideal. The assertion of a public interest was political for Croly, but it was also an intensely moral and even religious statement.

The content of the proposed ideal was to be a combination of "nationality" and "democracy," of the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian traditions in American thought. This combination was not easy or evident, however, and Croly had a somewhat ambivalent view of American ideals and achievements. In his extensive survey of American history, he praised the generation of the Founders as original thinkers, but argued that later figures had not been so original or so clear in their ideas: "For one generation American statesmen were vigorous and fruitful political thinkers; but the time soon came when Americans ceased to criticise their own ideas, and since that time the meaning of many of our fundamental national conceptions has been partly obscured, as well as partly expressed, by the facts of our national growth." Nevertheless, a national ideal, the inspiration of a national promise, had to be derived from its subject, or it would be unconvincing. Whatever their inadequacy, American political ideas and traditions would have to form the basis of the argument: "Such as it is, however, the American people are attached to this national tradition; and no part of it could be suddenly or violently transformed or mutilated without
wounding large and important classes among the American people, both in their interests and feelings.”19 Croly also admitted that “in case the proposed conception of the Promise of American life cannot be applied to our political and economic history without essential perversion, it must obviously fall to the ground.”20 Of course, as Croly had remarked earlier, the national tradition couldn’t be “violated” in the course of stating the ideal, but it could be “transformed.”21 In Croly’s reading of American history, nationalism and democracy were the best candidates for this transformation.22 We turn first to his understanding of nationalism, or “nationality,” as he often called it.

Of the two elements in his ideal, Croly felt more congenial with “nationality” and with its American spokesman, Alexander Hamilton. Croly had remarked at the very beginning of The Promise that it was nationality that makes a people “thoroughly alive.”23 He admitted that he admired Hamilton above Jefferson: “I shall not disguise the fact that, on the whole, my own preferences are on the side of Hamilton rather than of Jefferson. He was the sound thinker, the constructive statesman, the candid and honorable, if erring, gentleman.”24 Indeed, ignoring James Madison, James Wilson, and a host of other framers, Croly credited Hamilton with much of the formulation of the “Federal Constitution” itself as well as the legislative program of the Washington administration. His praise of Hamilton’s national principle was often laudatory: “On the persistent vitality of Hamilton’s national principle depends the safety of the American republic and the fertility of the American idea.”25

Croly continued this admiration of Hamilton for the rest of his life, writing, for example, to Walter Lippmann in 1921 that Hamilton “was a publicist, a philosopher and a constructor of the whole Federalist point of view; and more than any other single man, the intellectual father of the Republic.”26 Croly shared this enthusiasm for Hamilton with a number of political figures at the time, many of them leading conservatives such as Henry Cabot Lodge and Elihu Root.27 Most important, he also shared it with Theodore Roosevelt, and it was in his praise of Roosevelt and his linkage of Roosevelt to Hamilton that Croly coined the famous “new Nationalism” phrase, which Roosevelt later used in turn to describe his own program.

In Croly’s analysis, Roosevelt was “Hamiltonian with a difference.” Hamilton himself had been praiseworthy in emphasizing national cohesion and the need for national programs and power. But Hamilton did not seek a sufficiently broad popular base for the realization of this program. He ignored the other half of the ideal, democracy; he was too fearful of the people. As a result, federalism achieved less than it might have. “It can, I believe, be stated without qualification that wherever the nationalist idea
and tendency has been divided from democracy, its achievements have been limited and partially sterilized.”

This limitation was emphatically not true of Roosevelt, and Croly pronounced that “the new Federalism or rather new Nationalism is not in any way inimical to democracy. On the contrary, not only does Mr. Roosevelt believe himself to be an unimpeachable democrat in theory, but he has given his fellow-countrymen a useful example of the way in which a college-bred and a well-to-do man can become by somewhat forcible means a good practical democrat.” The Harvard man turned cowboy turned Rough Rider had demonstrated that “the whole tendency of his programme is to give a democratic meaning and purpose to the Hamiltonian tradition and method. He proposes to use the power and resources of the Federal government for the purpose of making his countrymen a more complete democracy.”

In 1909, Croly was aware (though not as aware as he was later to become) of the dangers of the “national idea.” One section of The Promise surveyed the possible combination of nationality and democracy in European political systems. In a brief discussion of Bismarck’s program, Croly praised the former chancellor for developing the logic of a “national type of political organization” and for transforming his “theory of responsible administrative activity into a comprehensive national policy.” But he also faulted Bismarck for “bullying and browbeating” his opponents and noted that he had driven the social democrats into opposition, with the result that the government was “losing touch” with democracy. Croly was not optimistic about Germany’s domestic prospects. He also noted that nationalism could lead to war: Europe had “become a vast camp” by 1909. These were examples of the dangers of nationality when it was not combined with “an infusion of democracy.”

Despite these reservations, Croly was an enthusiastic nationalist in 1909: “The modern nation, particularly in so far as it is constructively democratic, constitutes the best machinery as yet developed for raising the level of human association.” Using phrases that could have been drawn from Josiah Royce, Croly ventured an extended metaphor about the role of “national schools”:

Everybody within the schoolhouse—masters, teachers, pupils and janitors, old pupils and young, good pupils and bad, must feel one to another an indestructible loyalty. Such loyalty is merely the subjective aspect of their inevitable mutual association; it is merely the recognition that as a worldly body they must all live or die and conquer or fail together. The existence of an invincible loyalty is a condition of the perpetuity of the school.
NATIONALITY was incomplete without democracy. But what was democracy? Croly had a harder time explaining his views on this concept, largely, I think, because he was quite ambivalent in his own mind about democracy. He was genuinely convinced that democracy was a necessary complement to nationality. He also knew that Americans were attached to the concept; if for that reason alone, it would have to be part of the social ideal. But Croly was not an enthusiastic democrat, largely because he was not particularly committed to the concept of equality, which is such a central part of any convincing definition of democracy. Croly’s efforts to work out his views on democracy led him into the most theoretically complex parts of his argument.

The historical figure that Croly used to illustrate American democracy was, of course, Thomas Jefferson, and Croly, like his father, did not think highly of the third president. He pronounced that Jefferson did possess “one saving quality which Hamilton himself lacked: Jefferson was filled with a sincere, indiscriminate, and unlimited faith in the American people.” This comment was meant as praise, but Croly’s reservations are evident. He proceeded to levy more harsh criticisms, terming Jefferson’s conception of democracy “meager, narrow, and self-contradictory.”

Croly made his criticism more specific by singling out two points. First, he argued that Jefferson was incapable of embodying his theory of democracy “in a set of efficient institutions.” This comment was directed primarily at Jefferson the president rather than Jefferson the political theorist. Jefferson’s policy, Croly argued, was “the old fatal policy of drift.” Jefferson refused to develop governmental institutions because he believed in as little government as possible.

The second major reason for devaluing Jefferson was that his democracy “was tantamount to extreme individualism. He conceived a democratic society to be composed of a collection of individuals, fundamentally alike in their abilities and deserts.” Jefferson, to Croly’s mind, had not given scope for the more able members of the society to develop their own individual talents—Jefferson’s conception of democracy had led to the society that Robert Grant had described, in which “specialists” were not sufficiently valued.

Croly concluded this historical picture by deciding that Jefferson had “sought an essentially equalitarian and even socialistic result by means of an essentially individualistic machinery.” He continued: “His theory implied a complete harmony both in logic and in effect between the idea of liberty and the idea of equality; and just in so far as there is any antagonism between those ideas, his whole political system becomes unsound and impracticable.” When such an antagonism did develop, in Croly’s view, “the Jeffersonian Democrats have been found on the side of equality.”
In these passages, we see Croly introducing two other important political concepts, equality and liberty, into his analysis of democracy. In Croly's view, Jefferson had identified democracy too closely with equality, de-emphasizing the importance of liberty. But how could these principles be integrated? What was the proper relation among them? If Jefferson's understanding of democracy was inadequate, what would a more adequate conception involve? These questions—the construction of an adequate understanding of democracy, while giving due account also of the place of equality and liberty in a good political system—brought Croly to central questions of political theory. He tried to make his views clear in a section of *The Promise* entitled "Reconstruction; Its Conditions and Purposes."

Croly begins this argument by positing that democracy "as most frequently understood is essentially and exhaustively defined as a matter of popular government." Contrasting liberty and democracy, he notes that this view has been opposed by "constitutional liberals in England, in France, and in this country [who] have always objected to democracy as so understood, because of the possible sanction it affords for . . . a popular despotism." I think it is significant that Croly does not reject this criticism; however, he goes on to say that "ultimate responsibility for the government of a community must reside somewhere." Modern governments require popular sovereignty in some form. In yet another telling passage, Croly again ties democracy to liberty, while suggesting an altered understanding of what liberty might be: "A people, to whom was denied the ultimate responsibility for its welfare, would not have obtained the prime condition of genuine liberty."

Having endorsed popular sovereignty as necessary for democracy and for a good state, Croly at once asserts that this is not a sufficient definition: "If, however, democracy does not mean anything less than popular Sovereignty, it assuredly does mean something more. . . . The assertion of the doctrine of popular Sovereignty is, consequently, rather the beginning than the end of democracy." Croly goes on to explain what else is needed.

The "ordinary American answer" to this question is to cite an aspect of equality as central, specifically "equal rights under the law." As Croly presents this typical answer: "If any citizen or any group of citizens enjoys by virtue of the law any advantage over their fellow-citizens, then the most sacred principle of democracy is violated. On the other hand, a community in which no man or no group of men are granted by law any advantage over their fellow-citizens is the type of the perfect and fruitful democratic state." Croly is convinced that this is the common American view of democ-
racy. Individuals would enjoy equal liberties under this principle, and a reconciliation of individual and social interests would be effected. “The divergent demands of the individual and the social interest can be reconciled by grafting the principle of equality on the thrifty tree of individual rights, and the ripe fruit thereof can be gathered merely by shaking the tree.” Croly’s metaphor here evokes, of course, the “old fatal policy of drift,” the prevailing laissez-faire assumptions. So the common American definition of democracy is wrong; Croly’s earlier statement of the need for a national purpose was meant to demonstrate the inadequacy of this very view. The ideal of democracy would need to be further reconstructed.

Croly begins this process by making a bow to equal rights: “It must be immediately admitted ... that the principle of equal rights, like the principle of ultimate popular political responsibility is the expression of an essential aspect of democracy.” However, there are two major problems with this principle: first, it is illogical and inconsistent, and second, it doesn’t give adequate scope to the truly able individual. Thus Croly is asking for conceptual clarification, but he is also saying that he has doubts about an emphasis on equality. He is trying to develop a conception of democracy while de-emphasizing equality—not an easy argument to make.

Croly turns first to the conceptual clarification. “Equal rights” has meant two different things to Americans, he argues, which we might call today equality of rights or equality of opportunity. An emphasis on rights has led inevitably to an emphasis on property in the American system. Yet, in the very same breath that Americans defend property rights, they also argue that their system allows equality of opportunity. Croly thought that most Americans had so far failed to perceive that the logic and particularly the practical effects of these two understandings of “equality” are contradictory: people who begin the “race of life” with property are at a substantial advantage, and there is, in fact, no true equality of opportunity present in the system.

The democratic principle requires an equal start in the race, while expecting at the same time an unequal finish. But Americans who talk in this way seem wholly blind to the fact that under a legal system which holds private property sacred there may be equal rights, but there cannot possibly be any equal opportunities for exercising such rights. The chance which the individual has to compete with his fellows and take a prize in the race is vitally affected by material conditions over which he has no control. ... Those who have enjoyed the benefits of wealth and thorough education start with
an advantage which can be overcome only by very exceptional men.\textsuperscript{47}

This argument was a strong challenge to laissez-faire, a challenge as powerful in theory as Croly's criticism of the social effects of laissez-faire had been in more practical terms. His conclusion was that Americans had not "readjusted their political ideas to the teaching of their political and economic experience."\textsuperscript{48} American opinion would have to admit that allegiance simply to "equality of rights" would not do, that "continued loyalty to a contradictory principle is destructive of a wholesome public sentiment and opinion." The principle of equal rights, as Americans had stated it, was "confusing, distracting, and at worst, disintegrating." Instead, America needed a theory that was "binding and healing and unifying."\textsuperscript{49}

Croly tried to furnish this theory as he turned to the second objection to the common view, that it doesn't give adequate scope to able individuals. As he begins this theoretical construction, Croly makes clear once again his own doubts about another fundamental understanding of equality, the idea that humans have equal abilities. He argues immediately that some people are more able than others, and a political system must give able individuals space to achieve their potential. Indeed, this would be a true equality of opportunity, and in the sphere of intellect and political leadership, not material advantage. It is interesting to note that Croly thus was pointing out the importance of personal liberties like freedom of speech and de-emphasizing economic liberty. Of course, to this faithful student of Royce individual potential in any field must be achieved \textit{within the social ideal}, within the common good. It can't be an individual, selfish potential. Croly thus posits a conception of a democratic community, the "national democracy" that will allow a true equality of opportunity for able individuals to achieve their full development.

This is the conception that Croly thinks Jefferson overlooked. When Jefferson "and his followers" have referred to "the people," they have meant "the people in so far as they could be generalized and reduced to an average. The interests of this class were conceived as inimical to any discrimination which tended to select peculiarly efficient individuals or those who were peculiarly capable of social service."\textsuperscript{50}

This was an inaccurate characterization of Jefferson's own views. Perhaps Herbert Croly was following his father's views rather than reading Jefferson on his own. If he had read further, he would have found that Jefferson did indeed identify a "natural aristocracy" as an important element in a society, and did hope (for Jefferson there was no institutional guarantee) that a democratic electorate would often trust in these able leaders.\textsuperscript{51} Perhaps Croly was really thinking more of the Jacksonians, or
perhaps he was writing against the contemporary invocation of Jefferson as a theorist of laissez-faire. In any case, he thought the effect of this "Jeffersonian" view was to "discriminate in favor of the average or indiscriminate individual," and this had "succeeded at the expense of individual liberty, efficiency, and distinction." Croly also meant to suggest that a true democracy was less a matter of popular will than popular deliberation that was to be guided by the more able—in which argument he was closer to Jefferson than he realized.

One way to save individual liberty and distinction was that of "Hamilton and the constitutional liberals," who argued that the "state should interfere exclusively on behalf of individual liberty." Again significantly, Croly does not reject this view as wrong, but he does find it inadequate. As he had already argued, this was not a possible answer in a democracy. A "constitutional liberal" state (Croly uses the example of the "Orleans Monarchy" in France) "might well give its citizens fairly good government," but it "could not arouse vital popular interest and support."

In his own theory, then, Croly rejects a limitation on the suffrage, appealing as this answer might be (he writes it "has the appearance of being reasonable; and it has made a strong appeal to those statesmen and thinkers who believed in the political leadership of intelligent and educated men"). On the other hand, the able must be given a leading role in a democracy, which must thus "encourage the political leadership of experienced, educated, and well-trained men, but only on the express condition that their power is . . . used . . . for the benefit of the people as a whole."

Croly had earlier argued that a democracy "cannot afford to give any one class of its citizens a permanent advantage. . . . It ceases to be a democracy, just as soon as any permanent privileges are conferred by its institutions or its laws." This clearly suggests that able individuals should be able to earn temporary distinctions. Indeed, a "well-governed state will use its power to promote edifying and desirable discriminations." Such "advantageous discriminations," when "properly selected," contribute "both to individual and to social efficiency." But they must not be allowed to "outlast their own utility." He concludes that "the individual is merged in the mass, unless he is enabled to exercise efficiently and independently his own private and special purposes." At the same time, "transformed" democracy "must cease to be a democracy of indiscriminate individualism, and become one of selected individuals who are obliged constantly to justify their selection; and its members must be united . . . by a sense of joint responsibility for the success of their political and social ideal."

Croly thought he was now ready to "venture upon a more fruitful
definition of democracy." It does not mean, he wrote, "merely government by the people, or majority rule, or universal suffrage." These are indeed part of its "necessary organization," but democracy's essence is to promote some salutary and formative purpose. The really formative purpose is not exclusively a matter of individual liberty, although it must give individual liberty abundant scope. Neither is it a matter of equal rights alone, although it must always cherish the social bond which that principle represents. The salutary and formative democratic purpose consists in using the democratic organization for the joint benefit of individual distinction and social improvement.

This is a very interesting formulation. On a formal level, Croly has identified the elements that are normally viewed as essential to democratic theory. He has assumed majority rule and universal suffrage. He has seen that individual freedoms are a part of democracy, though he has not emphasized the direct connection to the democratic process of such freedoms as freedom of speech or freedom of the press. He has also seen that equality is a necessary part of democracy, though he has de-emphasized equality substantially at the same time. On the other hand, Croly's delineation of reconstructed democracy has elevated the role of the able individual—of the elite, if you will—more than we normally see in a "democratic" theory. Admittedly, he has tried to make it clear that this must be an elite of talent and not of birth or money (again, he was much closer to Jefferson here than he knew), and it could not be permanent. Still, his theory is meant to give considerable scope to a political and intellectual elite—within the limited framework of popular sovereignty. Croly here shows himself to be not an egalitarian, even as he tries to be a democrat. It was a difficult position to sustain, as he found out in future years.

The proposed construction of a polity that gave adequate scope to a political and intellectual elite while remaining democratic was optimistic, Croly realized, and he searched for examples that would prove the point. He found one in American history and one in contemporary politics.

The historical example was Abraham Lincoln, and Croly devoted a ten-page section of his historical analysis to the topic "Lincoln as More Than an American." In a generally gloomy survey of American history (particularly after the founding period), Lincoln stood out. His fame came, of course, from abolishing slavery and saving the union, but Croly went well beyond these points. "The life of no other American," he judged, "has revealed with anything like the same completeness the peculiar moral
promise of genuine democracy." Lincoln's was the "kind of excellence which a political and social democracy may and should fashion."⁶⁴

Lincoln's particular virtue was to be a man of the people. He could sit in the "corner grocery store" and swap stories with all classes of people. But he was also a man who exhibited "high and disinterested intellectual culture," unlike the ordinary American who "subordinated his intelligence to certain dominant practical interests."⁶⁵ Lincoln read widely and trained his mind effectively. He was personally humble, politically magnanimous, yet "intellectually candid." Above all, he was not afraid to use national power when it was needed. "He became the individual instrument whereby an essential and salutary national purpose was fulfilled."⁶⁶

The contemporary example of Croly's national democracy was, of course, Theodore Roosevelt. Croly judged that "more than any other American political leader, except Lincoln, his devotion both to the national and to the democratic ideas is thorough-going and absolute." Roosevelt was not perfect—his program needed reconstruction. Even so, Croly believed that Roosevelt had combined democracy with the requisite emphasis on a disinterested elite: "Mr. Roosevelt has exhibited his genuinely national spirit in nothing so clearly as in his endeavor to give to men of special ability, training, and eminence a better opportunity to serve the public."⁶⁷

The ideal of a national democracy was thus possible. Yet it would not be easy to develop fully the sense of national purpose that Croly knew would be necessary to hold the good society together. To assume that this ideal could be realized was something of a matter of faith as well as political planning.⁶⁸

Croly realized how optimistic some of his assumptions were. He wrote at the beginning of his last chapter that "in the course of this discussion, it has been taken for granted that the American people under competent and responsible leadership could deliberately plan a policy of individual and social improvement." This in turn implied that "human nature can be raised to a higher level by an improvement in institutions and laws."⁶⁹ Croly admitted that many readers probably would have thought this point "overworked," and he also admitted that in his understanding "human nature is composed of most rebellious material, and that the extent to which it can be modified by social and political institutions of any kind is, at best, extremely small."⁷⁰ However, Croly went on essentially to admit the charge: "Democracy must stand or fall on a platform of possible human perfectibility. If human nature cannot be improved by institutions, democracy is at best a more than usually safe form of political organization." And in his concluding paragraph, he quoted Montesquieu to the effect that "the principle of democracy is virtue."⁷¹
As we have seen, an important influence on Croly’s idea of a national purpose was Josiah Royce’s idealism. Royce had conveyed to his pupil a philosophic, yet also a religious, vision of a community united by loyalty to an ideal. This philosophy *cum* religion taught Croly that moral improvement or “regeneration” (one of his favorite words) was possible. We have seen the influence of this view in such passages as Croly’s extended metaphor of the national schoolhouse. Another discussion in which Croly’s faith is evident is his treatment of “Tolstoyan democracy.” Here he writes that “the idea that a higher type of associated life can be immediately realized by a supreme act of faith must always be tempting to men who unite social aspirations with deep religious faith.” He judges this a “more worthy and profound conception of democracy than the conventional American one of a system of legally constituted and equally exercised rights, fatally resulting in material prosperity.”

Nevertheless, Croly realizes this view is unrealistic and impossible of practical realization. It may be possible to change small groups of “unregenerate men from a condition of violence, selfishness, and sin into a condition of beatitude and brotherly love,” but such an exclusive idea will never do for a national organization. “In this world faith cannot dispense with power and organization. . . . But with the help of efficient organization it may possibly survive, whereas in the absence of such a worldly body, it must in a worldly sense inevitably perish. Democracy as a living movement in the direction of human brotherhood has required, like other faiths, an efficient organization.”

In this passage, we see only a partial triumph of the social theorist and political realist over the religious believer. Nevertheless, the theme of “brotherhood” is never far from the surface, and a full understanding of Croly’s conception of “national democracy” must take account of this dimension of his thought.

Brotherhood or fraternity (to use what Croly considered a synonym) was tied to democracy in another discussion, which follows immediately on Croly’s “fruitful definition of democracy” that we have just discussed. Here Croly draws on a work by a French writer, Emile Faguet, who seems in turn to be discussing Tocqueville. Faguet had written that liberty and equality were contradictory, indeed were exclusive of one another—the famous Tocqueville argument. But Faguet went on to claim that fraternity could conciliate these principles, indeed could stimulate them to be more productive. Croly takes this French triad and reinterprets it slightly: “The two subordinate principles, that is, one representing the individual [liberty] and the other the social interest [equality], can by their subordination to the principle of human brotherhood, be made in the long run mutually helpful.” He adds: “The foregoing definition of the democratic purpose is
the only one which can entitle democracy to an essential superiority to other forms of political organization." Croly’s national democracy was thus grounded in American history, but it was also based on a moral vision of what a good human community must be.

IN THE COURSE of discussing “national democracy,” Croly often explored the concepts of “rights” and “freedom.” Yet he did not emphasize these concepts in The Promise. At first glance, this de-emphasis, of freedom particularly, is strange, since freedom and rights have always been central in American thought about politics. However, the point is less strange when we remember the political context within which Croly was writing. Conservative theorists strongly emphasized property rights in this period. Indeed, the decision of the Supreme Court in Lochner v. New York (198 U.S. 45)—one of the high points in the theory of substantive due process, the theory essentially enshrining property rights in the Fourteenth Amendment—had been handed down in 1905, the year Croly began writing. The theory of rights was thus often equated with a conservative emphasis on property. Freedom as a concept was less clearly identified with conservative policies. Nevertheless, substantive due process included such understandings as “freedom of contract,” which was a foundation of the theory of property and of laissez-faire generally.

While Croly does not emphasize the concepts of rights and freedom, he does deal with them, and they are important to his thought. Indeed, I think that his reconceptualization of freedom in The Promise, while not fully developed, is one of the central aspects of his political theory. Together with his writing on the idea of individualism, his ideas about freedom are central to the reconstruction of American liberal political theory that Croly was shaping.

In The Promise, Croly resisted any idea that the concept of rights was the foundation of a good political system. He thought that rights overemphasized the divisions within a polity, rather than its unity. He wrote that when liberties and rights were “abstractly considered,” they tended to “conflict both one with another and, perhaps, with the common weal.” If the chief purpose of a democracy was the preservation of rights, “local, factional, and individual ambitions” would be overly encouraged. A “right” was also too absolute for Croly—it implied too strong a restriction on the ability of the government to act in the national interest. For these same reasons, Croly resisted using a social contract understanding of the origin of government. A country was not the result of a “necessary but hazardous surrender of certain rights and liberties in order that other rights might be preserved.” On the contrary, “the nationalized political
organization constitutes the proper structure and veritable life of the American democracy." In this rejection of social contract theory and the conception of an isolated individual armed with abstract "rights," Croly was in agreement with much of the developing progressive theory of the time.

As he traced these arguments in American history, Croly thought that the federalists had mistakenly overemphasized property rights. They "sought to surround private property, freedom of contract, and personal liberty with an impregnable legal fortress." The antifederalists were also to blame in seeking to require "a still more stringent bill of individual and state rights." Croly was by no means completely opposed to these arguments. He wrote that these "legal restrictions" had their "value"; they were even "the expression of an essential element in the composition and the ideal of the American nation. The security of private property and personal liberty . . . demanded at that time, and within limits still demand, adequate legal guarantees." So Croly was not opposed to individual rights and liberties or to private property per se.

However, he did oppose an overemphasis on these concepts. He thought the American system had gone too far in guaranteeing rights against the democratic principle. In Croly's view, "every popular government should in the end, and after a necessarily prolonged deliberation, possess the power of taking any action, which, in the opinion of a decisive majority of the people, is demanded by the public welfare." No doubt thinking about Court decisions such as Lochner, Croly occasionally stated his anger at the enshrinement of absolute property rights in more extreme terms: "The time may come when the fulfillment of a justifiable democratic purpose may demand the limitation of certain rights, to which the Constitution affords such absolute guarantees; and in that case the American democracy might be forced to seek by revolutionary means the accomplishment of a result which should be attainable under the law." However, he normally expressed himself more moderately. The fault in the current understanding of rights lay in the "practical immutability of the Constitution." Supporting in effect an easier process of amendment, Croly argued that if the Constitution "could be altered whenever a sufficiently large body of public opinion has demanded a change for a sufficiently long time, the American democracy would have much more to gain than to fear from the independence of the Federal judiciary."

I think it is inaccurate to conclude that Croly was opposed to individual rights. However, it is accurate to say that in The Promise he resisted a conceptualization of "natural rights": any area of behavior to be reserved to the individual was the result of a social determination, not an abstract principle.
It is also the case that Croly was not very interested in causes that would later become important “civil rights” issues. For example, he did not concern himself with issues of racial equality. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909, the year Croly’s book was published, and some of his fellow progressives were involved. But Croly was not. Indeed, several passages in The Promise make it clear that Croly was racist in some of his conceptions. For example, in his historical analysis, while opposing slavery he wrote of southern slaveholders that they were right “in believing that the negroes were a race possessed of moral and intellectual qualities inferior to those of the white man.” Croly was not alone in these attitudes, but it is clear that his concern for “regeneration” was culturally somewhat limited.

More surprising because of his own upbringing was Croly’s entire omission of the topic of women’s suffrage and more generally of women’s rights. Despite having a leading feminist for a mother, Herbert Croly displayed no concern for women’s issues, nor does his writing on democracy in The Promise ever deal with the issue of suffrage restriction because of sex.

It would seem that the reasons for these omissions lie primarily in Croly’s sense of national unity and in his strong opposition to any appeal for the interests (whether or not these were couched in the language of “rights”) of any group within the national democracy. The sense of national unity, of a national community, is a dominant theme of The Promise, and it prevented Croly from being as sympathetic as he would become to group arguments for equality or rights within this community. It is also true that Croly (probably largely because of his personal background) was not an egalitarian—he was not a defender of the poor or the oppressed, despite his emphasis on democracy.

In examining Croly’s views on the concept of freedom, it may be useful to establish immediately that “freedom” or “liberty” (I use the words as synonyms) have several meanings. Isaiah Berlin has distinguished between “negative” and “positive” freedom. In addition, the concept of “positive freedom” has two somewhat different meanings, one suggestive of a moral freedom and one describing a social or economic sufficiency that is necessary for freedom in practical terms. These distinctions are useful in understanding Croly’s conception of freedom.

Berlin’s “negative freedom” is the classic liberal emphasis on freedom from the control of others; it maximizes the domain of individual choice. Leading theorists of this persuasion would be John Locke, Benjamin Constant, and in most respects John Stuart Mill. This is the sense of liberty
emphasized in classic liberal theory. It is what we have seen Croly describe as the position of the "constitutional liberals." I have argued that this traditional understanding of liberty was important to Croly, but it was a partial, "limited" truth and was too often opposed to democracy.

Croly argues that this understanding of liberty is distinctively English; indeed, the "idea of liberty" is called the "great formative English political idea." However, in English politics this idea came to stand for the property rights of the English upper classes, with the result that the English political leaders "abandoned . . . leadership in economic affairs and allowed a merely individualistic liberalism complete control of the fiscal and economic policy of the country."

Croly hoped that Englishmen would "come to understand the need of dissociating their national idea from its existing encumbrances of political privilege and social favoritism." In other words, liberty needed to be extricated from laissez-faire economics. Pressing his own view of the American "national ideal" on them, Croly thought that Englishmen also would need to accept a greater degree of democracy. This would not, however, be easy given the English economic system. In short, negative liberty of the English or "constitutional liberal" variety was important for Croly, but it was not sufficient.

Isaiah Berlin describes "positive freedom" (in the first of the senses we mentioned, that of freedom as a moral imperative) as an idea that humans are free when they live according to the dictates of a "latent rational will, or their 'true' purpose." This is freedom to lead a good, moral life. It is this sense of the concept that we find in Rousseau's Social Contract where he urges us to exchange natural freedom (negative freedom) for civil or moral freedom (positive freedom). This is also the freedom of Kant, and particularly of Hegel, for whom we are free within the nation-state.

We might expect, particularly in view of David Croly's positivism, that this view of freedom could be found in Herbert Croly's writings. His training in Royce's idealism might also be thought to dispose Croly to this argument. In fact, however, this understanding of freedom is not present in any substantial sense in Croly's thought. Croly does hope that when individuals live according to a national ideal they will be inspired to a more moral life, but he does not argue that this is "freedom." The argument of The Promise does not lead to a theory of positive freedom in this sense. One reason it does not is that Royce's influence on Croly led only very partially in this direction, and, of course, Royce's thought was only one of many influences that can be found in The Promise. Rather, Royce, while he certainly drew from Hegel, drew more strongly from English idealism, and English idealists had introduced crucial distinctions into
their thought, including a distinction between “society” and “the state” and a much stronger emphasis on individualism.\(^94\)

In fact, English idealism led in the direction of our second understanding of positive freedom, that of freedom as an economic sufficiency allowing a practical enjoyment of individualism or freedom. I think that this understanding of freedom can be found in Croly’s thought—indeed, that he is one of the first Americans to use this sense of positive freedom.

This second understanding of positive freedom is hard to define. It is essentially the argument that humans need economic security and other social conditions (normally provided, at least in part, by the state) that will allow us to develop our individuality without finding our lives controlled by others because of economic privations. The idea is nicely expressed in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech, in which he spells out four essential freedoms in the world: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, “freedom from want,” and “freedom from fear.” The first two are negative freedoms; the last two point in the direction of this understanding of positive freedom.\(^95\)

The seminal statement of this position was by the English idealist T. H. Green (1836–1882), whose theory Croly could well have studied with Palmer and Royce. In a lecture on “Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract” in 1880, Green had argued that freedom was not “merely freedom from restraint and compulsion.” Rather, “when we speak of freedom . . . we mean a positive power of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying. . . . We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow-men. . . .”\(^96\) Green went on to say that “the ideal of true freedom is the maximum of power for all members of human society alike to make the best of themselves. . . .” For him, this was “freedom in the positive sense.”\(^97\)

Later English writers drew from Green, arguing both that they were adapting the older liberal theory to new conditions, and that they were maintaining the central emphasis on liberty. For example, in Liberalism (1911), Leonard Hobhouse wrote that new liberals regarded “the State as one among many forms of human association for the maintenance and improvement of life . . . and this is the point at which we stand furthest from the older Liberalism.” However, Hobhouse went on to claim that there was “some reason for thinking that the older doctrines led, when carefully examined, to a more enlarged conception of State action . . . and we shall see more fully before we have done that the ‘positive’ conception of the State which we have now reached not only involves no conflict with the true principle of personal liberty, but is necessary to its effective realization.”\(^98\) He later expands on the argument that “there is no intrinsic and inevitable conflict between liberty and [state] compulsion,
but at bottom a mutual need. The object of compulsion is to secure the most favourable external conditions of inward growth and happiness so far as these conditions depend on combined action. . . . The sphere of liberty is the sphere of growth itself. There is no true opposition between liberty as such and control as such.”

Croly did not make the connection to classical liberal theory quite so explicit, but it seems clear that his argument is virtually the same as Hobhouse’s. For example, Croly writes that a “wholesome democracy should seek to guarantee to every male adult a certain minimum of economic power and responsibility. . . . The individuals constituting a democracy lack the first essential of individual freedom when they cannot escape from a condition of economic dependence.” Such dependence is contrary to all understanding of the American promise, both the popular belief in economic prosperity and Croly’s own ideal of national democracy.

Croly makes the restrictive, liberty-denying nature of laissez-faire clear when he writes that “Americans have always associated individual freedom with the unlimited popular enjoyment of all available economic opportunities. Yet it would be far more true to say that the popular enjoyment of practically unrestricted economic opportunities is precisely the condition which makes for individual bondage.” State action to lend assistance to the “workingman to raise his standard of living” would “increase the amount of economic independence enjoyed by the average laborer . . . and intensify his importance to himself as an individual. It would in every way help to make the individual workingman more of an individual.”

These statements are not a fully explicit statement of positive freedom, but the direction in which Croly was seeking to “transform” or “reconstruct” the idea of liberty is, I think, clear. Croly had not yet adopted the “liberal” label, as Hobhouse and Green had, but he had established some of the conditions for doing so.

BEFORE WE CAN talk of Croly being a liberal, we must consider one more concept—that of individualism. This idea is rightly considered the touchstone of liberalism—no theorist can be considered a liberal who is not concerned to enunciate a theory of individualism.

Croly had, as we have seen, renounced the traditional American ideal of an isolated individual, armed with rights and facing a hostile world. Rather he had described a human being who was social and shared in a common national purpose. At the same time, Croly had been sensitized by his reading of Grant to the argument that able individuals (specialists) should develop their own particular abilities rather than being limited by
the prevailing values of the society. As in his delineation of a national idea that rejected both laissez-faire and socialism, Croly was thus trying to find a middle position on the individual-community balance.

This middle position is evident throughout *The Promise*. For example, in the chapter in which he is most theoretically detailed, Croly writes that it is the function of the democratic state "to represent the whole community; and the whole community includes the individual as well as the mass, the many as well as the few. The individual is merged in the mass, unless he is enabled to exercise efficiently and independently his own private and special purposes."\(^{103}\)

Croly considers the question of individualism in a number of other passages. For example, his discussion of positive freedom, just considered, had argued that state action to help free workers from economic coercions would intensify their individualism. The major explication of the concept of individualism, however, occurs in the long final chapter of *The Promise*, which is entitled "Conclusions—the Individual and the National Purpose." This chapter is often diffuse, but Croly attempts to bring his criticisms of American culture together with a focus on individualism. He argues that America in its policy of "drift" has really not "encouraged individualism at all." It has not encouraged specialists and the full development of individual capacities. This would be true individualism: "Individuality is necessarily based on genuine discrimination."\(^{104}\)

Emphasizing his previous theme of a common national purpose, Croly tries to tie his points together:

A national structure which encourages individuality as opposed to mere particularity is one which creates innumerable special niches, adapted to all degrees and kinds of individual development. The individual becomes a nation in miniature, but devoted to the loyal realization of a purpose peculiar to himself. The nation becomes an enlarged individual whose special purpose is that of human amelioration, and in whose life every individual should find some particular but essential function.\(^{105}\)

This passage clearly seeks to have it both ways—Croly refuses to sacrifice either the individual or the community. There is certainly a suggestion of the Hegelian nation, but the theme of individualism is distinctively liberal and American. Indeed, the passage is very different from the metaphor of the beehive that we saw David Croly using, in which he argued that the bees "but live for the community, the community does not exist for them."\(^{106}\) Rather, Herbert is much closer to Jane Croly's "unity in diversity." At the same time, it is clear that Croly had not yet reached a fully