Shaping Modern Liberalism

Stettner, Edward A.

Published by University Press of Kansas

Stettner, Edward A.
Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94117

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3065984
By all accounts, Herbert Croly was an extremely shy man. Indeed, his personal reserve probably kept him from being as actively involved in politics as he might have been if he had been more comfortable personally in situations of conflict. He was also a hesitant writer who labored over his prose with less success than most of his colleagues, who were all too well aware of his inability to express himself as clearly or concisely as he or they would have liked. For example, in early 1919 Harold Laski urged Walter Lippmann to return to the *New Republic* because he was so good in “bringing to maturity the ideas and hopes which struggle for expression in Herbert’s mind.”

Yet these same associates testified to Croly’s intellectual influence and to many admirable personal characteristics that held their loyalty. Felix Frankfurter called *The Promise of American Life* a “notable, seminal book” and claimed that “Croly planted not a few of the seeds” of the changes in American society engendered by the progressive movement. To Frankfurter, his friend Croly was “a noble creature. . . . He was noble, in the sense that to a rare degree he had a sense of justice. He was one of the most just-minded men I ever knew on or off the Supreme Court of the United States.” Edmund Wilson, a younger man of very different temperament, who knew Croly only in his later years, also admired him: “It seems to me that Croly was one of the most admirable men I have ever known. . . . [H]e was never dogmatic and never incoherent, always modest about his own limitations. . . .” A significant influence on such very different people, Croly clearly was a serious writer who tried over many years to express
a consistent picture of politics and the possibility of reform. But did he succeed? What was Croly’s achievement?

I HAVE ARGUED in this work that Croly was important in developing a conception of modern American liberalism. As I noted in the Introduction, there is no one synthetic political theorist who delineates American liberalism in a complete and systematic political theory. Indeed, this absence of a single, full theoretical statement may explain some of the problems that liberals have had in articulating a consistent vision in the face of a radical opposition from the “New Left” in the 1960s and 1970s and a resurgent American conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s. I think Herbert Croly’s writings come close to stating the fundamental founding assumptions of modern liberalism, closer than any other writer with whom I am familiar. The weaknesses or failures of his theory may also indicate some of the deeper problems in modern American liberalism. Let me explain how.

Most obviously, Croly and many other progressives elaborated modern liberalism’s emphasis on the responsibility of government, and especially the national executive, to improve social and economic conditions in the United States. This reliance is clear in the entire range of Croly’s work, from the early rejection of laissez-faire theory in *The Promise* to the strong support for Woodrow Wilson’s domestic politics in 1916 to the issues of the 1920s when, even as he became disillusioned to a degree with politics, Croly still called for government intervention in many areas of the economy. Croly’s emphasis on the importance of the national government to solve the nation’s ills and his emphasis on the expanded role of the executive at all levels of government are staple beliefs of modern liberalism. His stress on the important role of government regulation—of the economy in particular—and on the central position of a government bureaucracy in this regulatory process (recall the image of the bureaucrat tending the “social garden” in *Progressive Democracy*) are central elements in liberal politics from Roosevelt’s New Deal through Johnson’s Great Society.

Of course, Croly didn’t initiate these ideas by himself. He was responding, in part, to the example of an activist president, Theodore Roosevelt, when he wrote of the importance of the executive, and he was allied with many progressives in working for an active government. But Croly succeeded in embedding these arguments in a broader perspective on politics, and thus “planting seeds” in his readers’ minds, as Frankfurter argued. He made an expanded role for government part of a larger picture of what a good society should be, and his argument that government
should actively seek the realization of the national “promise” was of enormous influence.

Croly’s theory was also representative of liberalism in his belief in the possibilities of a “middle way” between laissez-faire and socialism, between capitalism and communism. He came to think of liberalism as a conscious attempt to create a centrist politics that would be reformist but that would at the same time appeal to a broad spectrum of groups and individuals. Croly consistently rejected a class analysis of politics, even in his period of severe disillusionment in the early 1920s. Rather, he argued in 1909 that America’s promise was open to everyone and again in the late 1920s that America had always been “liberal” in the sense that the class-based politics of Europe were inappropriate here. His religious conviction always bore witness to a regeneration of society as a whole. This support of a “middle way” is typical of modern liberal thought.

But did Croly appropriately call his theory “liberal”? As we have seen, he rarely (though occasionally) used this term prior to 1915. Rather, he originally described his theory as “progressive,” or as simply “reform.” Was his appropriation of the liberal heritage justified?

I have argued that Croly’s political theory shared significant continuities with the classic theory that he originally thought of as “liberal.” Classic liberalism emphasized individualism and individual rights and liberties as the central values of politics. As we have seen, Croly was committed to the importance of individualism even in The Promise, and he never deviated from that conviction. The individual could not be isolated; Croly always emphasized a “social will.” At times, the ties of society were strong indeed in his theory. The national organization and its general will, public opinion, were to be very significant influences on any individual. But we need to be clear that, for Croly, society never swallowed up the individual.

Croly was admittedly reluctant initially to endorse the concept of “rights,” and particularly any theory of “natural rights,” because of the close identification of that concept with conservative theories emphasizing property rights. However, as we have seen, he came to accept notions of rights as early as Progressive Democracy in 1914, and he particularly used the concept more fully in reaction to the war and the repression of individual liberties in the Red Scare of 1919–1920.

Freedom was also important to Croly. In The Promise, he began to suggest that this concept, so central to classic liberalism, could be understood in several ways. He did not originally emphasize the traditional notion of “negative freedom” or “freedom from” government control, but even in 1909 he accepted this understanding of freedom as a political
good. Later, he appreciated more fully the contemporary importance of this conception of liberty, as in his defense of freedom of speech during the Red Scare. Certainly, contemporary liberalism has continued the classic liberal emphasis on the importance of personal freedoms such as the freedom of speech or of religion or the rights to privacy.

But Croly didn’t write of “negative freedom” only. Rather, his analysis in *The Promise* began to explicate the new understanding of a “positive freedom” or “freedom to” develop one’s abilities free of what Franklin Roosevelt described as the “fear” and “want” of severe economic coercions. Indeed, Croly is one of the first American writers to describe this understanding of freedom. It is unfortunate that he did not elaborate this theory more fully in his later writings.

Croly thus drew on classic liberal theory in significant ways, but he changed it into a new and different liberalism, a “reformist liberalism” as he specifically argued in some of his last writings. One adaptation was of course his reliance on the role of government, especially the executive and the bureaucracy, as opposed to the classic liberal fear of government. Another adaptation was his suggestion of “positive freedom” as a supplement to “negative freedom.” A third was the separation of personal freedoms from a strong emphasis on property rights.

Perhaps Croly’s most important adaptation of liberalism was to tie it to democratic theory. In his (I believe correct) reading, classic liberals such as Alexis de Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill had been afraid of democracy, consistently emphasizing individual rights—minority rights, if you will—over democratic majority rule. Croly was not temperamentally a democrat, as can be seen in his hesitation to endorse the concept of equality in *The Promise*. But he understood that democracy was necessarily a central tenet of any American theory of politics, and he consequently argued a form of democratic theory from the beginning. His commitment to the progressive cause in the years 1910-1916 brought him to a much more wholehearted democratic position, to which he held for the rest of his life, even when disillusioned with American public opinion during and after the war. Croly’s disillusionment never resulted in an anti-democratic reaction. Rather, he argued that liberals needed to rethink how better to ground their liberal theory to make it convincing in a democratic society. For Croly, then, modern liberalism had to be democratic, while preserving the traditional emphasis on individualism and individual liberty.

Croly also helped develop the notion of pluralism, of a central emphasis on the role of interest groups, that is often seen as an identifying feature of modern liberal theory. Croly did not originate this argument and indeed may emphasize the centrality of interest groups less than
many other liberal theorists, especially given his stress on a strong executive. However, his writings, particularly *Progressive Democracy,* do show that he relied on a pluralist perspective.

Croly’s new understanding of liberalism thus combined the classic emphasis on individualism and freedom with democracy, pluralism, and the centrality of government. When we remember that his political program also emphasized a pragmatic approach to social experimentation, we are approaching a description of modern liberalism. Thus Otis L. Graham, who has written of the ties between progressivism and the New Deal, argues that “the redefinition of freedom, the critique of laissez-faire, the intellectual preparation of a creed for a popular interventionist state—these were provided by turn-of-the-century thinkers such as Dewey, Ward, Beard, and Croly. . . . Liberalism performed a transvaluation of means in the pursuit of the ancient ends. It is a triumphant historical record, culminating in the 1930’s with the creation of that long-desired welfare state of liberal predisposition.”

Graham may understate some differences in emphasis between Croly’s liberalism and the New Deal. For example, Croly’s policy of regulation never included such extensive government responsibility for the unemployed and the disadvantaged as Franklin Roosevelt developed in response to the Great Depression.

It is even more evident that Croly never emphasized certain elements of what we take as “liberal” in the last years of the century. Most obviously, he was never very concerned with “civil rights,” meaning the rights of minorities. Croly’s somewhat conditional endorsement of equality did not extend to a concern for racial equality and certainly not to such policies as affirmative action. Indeed, we would consider some of his views as racist. In these areas, his theory is not at all representative of contemporary liberalism. However, we should recall that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was not very concerned with “civil rights” either. This is a comparatively recent element of the liberal creed.

Croly was also not an advocate of gender equality. He was not even a strong supporter of women’s suffrage, which is particularly surprising considering his mother’s stand on that issue. In this respect, again, Croly does not speak to contemporary liberalism. On the other hand, his *New Republic* did provide strong support for personal rights such as birth control that are important to contemporary liberals.

In summary, Herbert Croly’s political theory is not identical to the liberalism of the late twentieth century or even to the liberalism of the New Deal. But many of the major emphases of modern liberalism can be seen in the work of this seminal theorist.
Unfortunately, Croly never brought his theory together as a whole. He never wrote the book that could have expressed his political thought in a systematic way. Indeed, *The Promise of American Life* is probably his most systematic work; yet he changed major parts of his theory in later years, while never returning fully to the fundamental arguments or perhaps to the philosophic rigor of the early work. Croly realized that he had changed many of his views. He said often to friends that he wanted to publish another book that would integrate his arguments. But he never did.

There seem to be several reasons why Croly didn't succeed in putting his thoughts together late in his life. The need to get out an issue of the *New Republic* fifty-two weeks a year was an enormous intellectual and even physical challenge. Croly was also committed by bonds of friendship to write Willard Straight's biography in the very years in which he was best equipped to integrate his early theory with the experiences of the war and the Red Scare.

Of course, Croly did try to produce a book in this period, and it was perhaps his greatest intellectual failure that this work, *The Breach in Civilization*, was not a better book. The reasons for this failure are again several, including the pressures on his time just mentioned. The fact that Croly chose to turn, in part, from politics to religion in these years seems crucial in attempting to understand both his search and perhaps also his failure. It is clear that his ability to write a systematic work in political theory was greatly affected by his search for religious truth after 1919.

Croly wrote that he had begun to "believe again" after the experience of the war. However, it is evident from reading his earlier works that a religious concern was never absent. He may not always have focused on personal belief, but Croly always did believe in human salvation, in the possible "regeneration" (to use a word he constantly employed) of human beings. This concern, which we can see as a generalized religious belief, or certainly as a "moralism" with strongly religious overtones, is evident in many arguments in *The Promise*. It is particularly clear in the near-utopian final pages of *Progressive Democracy*, and it runs through many of Croly's articles.

What thus seems to have happened after the war is not that Croly turned from politics to religion, but that his religious concerns, which were always present and indeed integrated into many parts of his political theory (as in the stress on "brotherhood" in *The Promise*), became more dominant in his thought. Edmund Wilson, who knew Croly only in the 1920s, wrote that "it is not at all difficult to imagine him becoming, in some other period, not a writer on politics, but, say, the founder of a
religious order.” Wilson overstates the case; certainly Croly continued to write extensively and acutely on politics until his stroke. But his religious concerns were central in the 1920s.

What, then, was the role of religion in Croly’s thought, particularly in the 1920s? A focus on religion in politics is often a nonliberal emphasis. It can often signal a reliance on tradition and on the claims of an authoritative belief system and hierarchy, rather than on individual choice and equality. However, Croly’s “religion” was not at all orthodox. Rather, quite in consonance with his liberalism, it emphasized a pragmatic individual search for truth, often in the realm of one’s own consciousness. Croly’s Christianity in the twenties was heavily laced with psychological and mystical elements. In contrast to a later liberal, Reinhold Niebuhr, who also emphasized a religious base for his theory, Croly’s Christianity lacks a sense of sin, of necessary human failure. His religion is “easier,” more optimistic, than Niebuhr’s.

But what was Croly seeking, and how did it relate to his politics? Answers here are necessarily speculative. Like many of his friends and associates, I don’t understand fully the arguments he was attempting to make about religion and psychology in his last years. But before dismissing these arguments, we should remember that Croly thought that liberalism needed a more firm philosophical grounding than had yet been provided. The conclusion he drew from the war was not only that individual rights needed to be reemphasized in liberalism and integrated with a progressive democratic theory, but also that the whole basis of liberalism needed to be reviewed.

Croly’s search for a philosophy of liberalism had earlier involved a rejection of laissez-faire and the emphasis on the concept of “natural rights” as convincing bases on which to build. In The Breach in Civilization, he shifted his attack to the inadequacy of utilitarianism, which he thought was an oversimplified theory of human psychology and politics. He was searching for a conception of religion and of human psychology that could more adequately undergird the political liberalism he espoused with its emphasis on public opinion, positive freedom, and government responsibility. Unfortunately, Croly never was able to state this relation to his own (and especially not to his associates’) satisfaction.

We may be more sympathetic with Croly’s diagnosis of the ills of liberalism, if not with his inexact prescription, if we believe that American liberalism hasn’t developed a satisfactory substitute for the utilitarian philosophic basis on which Croly thought liberals were still relying. For instance, John Rawls, in a work generally taken to be the most important statement of contemporary liberal theory, has written that “my aim is
to work out a theory of justice which represents an alternative to utilitarian thought generally." Other critics of contemporary liberalism take a slightly different line, emphasizing "communitarian" values and arguing that liberals still rely too fully on an isolated, self-interested individualism. Indeed, Croly's emphasis on fraternity, or brotherhood, as a necessary element in any good polity may even speak to some of the concerns that communitarians express about a self-interested liberalism.

Croly's concern for religion and for a psychology of self-consciousness was thus an attempt to deal with what he took to be the inadequacies of liberalism. His particular prescription for these ills has not been influential. At the same time, it is unfortunately the case that contemporary liberalism probably hasn't succeeded any better than Croly did in integrating a specifically political picture of government power and social responsibility with the philosophical and psychological arguments necessary to support a wholly coherent and convincing political theory. It is our loss as well as his that he was unable to complete his arguments satisfactorily in *The Breach in Civilization*.

Croly was best known by many of his readers for his writings on specific political and economic policy issues, and we also need to consider his achievements in these areas.

No doubt, Croly's writings on economic reorganization and on the regulation of the trusts were his best-known domestic policy recommendations. As we have seen, Croly's "short-run" program in *The Promise* was influenced very substantially by Theodore Roosevelt's previous policies. Yet Croly in turn provided Roosevelt with a wider picture and a more systematic theory within which to position his policies. I think he certainly had some influence on Roosevelt, but the influence from Roosevelt was more important.

At the same time, we should remember that it was Croly's short-run recommendations that Roosevelt inspired. Croly's long-term prescriptions, emphasizing the nationalization of industries and significant tax changes to render the distribution of wealth more equal, were significantly more radical than Roosevelt (or any politician) could accept, and he moved to even stronger positions in the early 1920s. It seems to me that some commentators have failed to see that Croly's economic theories were often quite radical in their implications. I find arguments that he was essentially conservative or pro-business or a "corporate liberal" unconvincing.

It is interesting that while Croly provided T.R. with a general ratio-
nale for a regulated economy, it was Charles Van Hise's *Concentration and Control* that provided the specific economic arguments to counter Louis Brandeis's detailed arguments for competition. Croly was not an economist, and his contributions to the theory of regulation were thus not technical. Indeed, he wrote about most policy issues as a generalist rather than as a specialist, and it is clear that his particular interests lay not in policymaking but in the larger project of reforming society as a whole. Croly was a reformer and a theorist, not a policy analyst.

One partial exception to this judgment might be the issue of state political reorganization on which he did develop a specialized interest in the period 1910 to 1916. This interest was strongly evident in *The Promise* and became more specifically focused on state executives and on issues of direct democracy in Croly's paper at the American Political Science Association in 1911 and in *Progressive Democracy*. It seems likely that Croly would have continued to develop this interest if progressivism had continued after 1916 rather than being cut off by the war.

I think an ambivalent judgment is appropriate regarding Croly's discussion of the war. I'm not sure he ever worked out a fully consistent understanding of the reasons for American participation. He argued a "realist" position: that the United States was now a great power and would be involved whether she consciously chose to be or not. But Croly the moralist could not rest in this realist argument, and he also justified American intervention on varied moral grounds: to seek an ultimate peace, to advance Western democracy, to defend Anglo-American liberalism against German authoritarianism. These arguments were not unconvincing, but I don't think Croly ever anchored them very fully to his more fundamental theory, and he never tied his moral arguments and his realism together in any sustained way. In this sense, Randolph Bourne was at least partially correct: Croly's liberalism did not provide full moral guidance for such a fundamental issue as war. Of course, this was one reason why Croly sought to reformulate his liberalism, but it is not clear that his reformulations would have been any more useful in thinking through this issue.

Certainly later liberal leaders facing World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War have responded much as Croly, Lippmann, Dewey, and Wilson did to the First World War. Indeed, the combination of liberalism's active government with an internationalist perspective and a willingness to use force in achieving "moral" international objectives has been a central feature of later liberal politics. However, it is unclear that these later leaders have thought through the basic philosophical arguments any more successfully than Croly and Woodrow Wilson did.
CROLY'S ENDURING achievements were his two major books and the New Republic.

The Promise of American Life was an extraordinary work. It is, I think, one of the most theoretically important books in American political thought. The historical treatment was incisive, the proposed combination of nationalism and democracy was carefully argued, and Croly's discussion of the relation between democracy, equality, liberty, and fraternity was theoretically quite subtle. In addition, the relations between the theory and the policy recommendations in the book were nicely elaborated, and the policy recommendations themselves were persuasive.

Progressive Democracy seems to me a less successful book. Croly's historical analysis is more rushed and less insightful. He is also less interested in engaging in theoretical explorations; too many points are assumed rather than argued. The book's attractions are its strong argument for democracy, its new pluralist approach, and particularly its detailed commentary on specific progressive reforms. Progressive Democracy clearly demonstrates how Croly had responded to the progressive movement and how he in turn was trying to guide the movement.

The New Republic was perhaps Croly's most important achievement. Under his editorship, it was a distinguished "journal of opinion" that provided its readers with superb commentary on a wide range of political and cultural issues. I doubt that any American journal since has matched the intellectual level of the New Republic under Herbert Croly.

On Croly's death in May 1930, one of his frequent English contributors, N. H. Brailsford, wrote to Louise Croly:

I suppose he must often have asked himself, as all journalists are forced to do, what would be left of this seemingly impermanent work. In his case I have no doubt about the answer. He gave us what is, I think, the most inspiring spectacle that a man can give his fellows—the spectacle of a mind of unusual power and still rarer integrity, struggling to apply its high standards and ideals to the daily world. That remains, and the memory of it will not soon fade. . . . I am sure that apart altogether from its good work in forming opinion, and spreading knowledge, The New Republic as he shaped it, and led it, must have become a great builder of character, an intellectual architect, for many thousands of its readers. 15

Herbert Croly, the lifelong student of both politics and architecture, would have appreciated this deserved praise.