Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* at Its Centenary

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PREFACE

This anthology derived from a two-day conference held January 11 and 12, 2008 at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. The conference was administered by the Virginia and Douglass Adair Symposia: Studies of Constitutional Democracy, which has organized a number of conferences over the past quarter of a century. (This anthology will be the third book issued by the Symposia.) Generous support was provided by the university's History Department, the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences, the CLASS Council, the History Club, Phi Alpha Theta, and the Political Science Club.

A number of individuals have contributed to the completion of this book. These include the original conference planning committee, made up of Charles Gossett, Stephen Englehart, Daniel Lewis, and Lisa Nashua. In addition, valuable contributions to the project were provided by colleagues Barbara Way, Judy Miles, Gayle Savarese, Michaele McConnell, Regina Cheng-Sheu, Patrick Merrill, Uyan Mai, David Speak, Jill Hargis, and Janet Brodie. Also integral to our efforts was the committed help from a group of delightful students, including Justin Smith, Jessica Romero, Sean McPherson, Michael Stover, José Vargas, Gerardo Huerta, Isabelle Selak, and particularly Andrea Jessen.

The contributors to this anthology, listed with brief biographical information toward the end of the book, submitted material on time or early (rather unusual for the typical anthology!), always did re-editing with similar care and promptness, and proved to be the most agreeable of scholarly associates.

Specific thanks should be extended to Stephen Englehart and David Levy for their reading all or part of the anthology's front matter and providing corrective and improving suggestions.

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Finally, John Stephen Moore—providing editorial skills and computer savvy, along with a calm and pleasant personality—really has been the indispensable ingredient in bringing this anthology to final fruition.

All the welcome help indicated in the foregoing words should in no way absolve the editor of unbecoming defects that may be found in the following pages.

JAM
December 23, 2008

INTRODUCTION

JOHN ALLPHIN MOORE, JR.

Herbert Croly's *Promise of American Life*, first published in 1909, was not a best-seller in the sense we understand that term today. Nonetheless, by 1912 The Macmillan Company, the original publisher, had issued three printings of the book. In 1913 a French edition was published in Paris, and as of 2005, the book had gone through fully eleven different printings, from a variety of publishing houses, suggesting its enduring stature as an American classic.[1] Also, the book had an acknowledged impact on early to mid-twentieth-century American politics and political thought. Theodore Roosevelt read the book after he left the White House and, when he decided to run for another term as president in 1912, used Croly's themes in his campaign. After Willard and Dorothy Straight read the book, they contacted Croly, and brought him together with Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl to edit the journal they founded in 1914—*The New Republic*. In 1961, Charles Forcey announced in his well-received book, *The Crossroads of Liberalism*, that "Croly's *Promise of American Life* of 1909 has become the prevailing political faith of most Americans."[2] Readers of this anthology will encounter Forcey's statement again in coming pages, along with several other commendations as to the importance of Croly's century-old volume. What Forcey meant in his astonishing claim is that Croly's ideas had achieved something like an apotheoses as the prevailing American political consensus, represented first by the New Deal and then sanctioned by the Eisenhower era. The impending era of the New Frontier and the Great Society underscored more firmly Forcey's assertion, as, during the 1960s, "liberalism" ascended to further primacy in American politics; or at least it appeared to.

Although we might think that such an assessment is not as relevant in a day subject to potent conservative thought (and to less profound

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[1] Because pagination is the same in all editions of the book, readers can follow commentary in this anthology using any of the printings. We use the original 1909 edition for citations.

[2] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), xxv.

"conservative" radio and television zeal), when the very word "liberalism" has become something of a pejorative term in many Americans' political lexicon, we actually find prominent libertarians sending up warnings that Croly remains the thinker most influential in affecting American politics and public policy. His sway even extends to so-called modern "conservatives," or "neo-conservatives," like those at the *Weekly Standard*, who relentlessly promote agendas of "national greatness." And, by the way, Croly's lasting effect, avow such detractors, is leading in dire directions.[3]

Croly's imprint is associated with an urging to emphasize the nation over the parochial individual or the isolated neighborhood. Unlike other reformers of his time, he privileged Alexander Hamilton over Thomas Jefferson in assessing the historic ideological divide between the two. That is, like Hamilton, he favored the nation over the primary community, the federal government over states, and active over passive government. He was particularly supportive of a robust presidency (Abraham Lincoln was his paramount hero). Thus he is seen as having been influential in transforming reform liberalism from an emphasis on individualism and extreme laissez-faire economic practices, into what became, under Franklin Roosevelt—followed by Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson—the regulatory state, headed by a strong president, and committed to expanding opportunity and equality.

Croly thought that America's promise—enjoyment of economic independence and prosperity, free political institutions, provision of a refuge for the oppressed, equality, democracy, a progressive and improving society, and a "hope that men can be improved without being fettered"[4]—was in serious trouble by the early twentieth century. New social and economic forces, unknown to the country's founders, challenged conventional ideas about government. The growth of powerful economic institutions, called trusts, had led to an unacceptable maldistribution of wealth. Croly saw these new economic behemoths,

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[3] Virginia Postrel, "The Croly Ghost: Exorcising the specter haunting American politics," *Reason Online*, December 1997; found at http://www.reason.com/news/show/30464.html; accessed September 3, 2008. Postrel writes: "we are still living in the political world [Croly's] ideas built—and struggling to escape it." In the waning days of the 2008 American presidential campaign, conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg warned that candidate Barack Obama's policies as president would revivify Herbert Croly, "who demonized individualism while sanctifying collective action overseen by the state." *Los Angeles Times,* October 21, 2008, A2.

[4] *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 9-13.

however, as a natural development, evolving to bring efficiency to production and distribution. The problem was that they were completely self interested, rather than being committed to the common good. This problem at the top of the economic heap was but a reflection of the deeper problem bequeathed the United States by Jefferson's fatal error in presuming that the nation could progress with each individual simply seeking his or her own self interest while ignoring the collective national purpose. Indeed, Jefferson's sanguine conception of human nature had left the condition of American life tending to "encourage an easy, generous, and irresponsible optimism."[5] Croly insisted that human agency, particularly in the form of an active and progressive national government, headed by an energetic chief executive, was essential for genuinely bolstering the American promise. No longer could the country rely on that "irresponsible optimism" assuming that if each individual pursued private advantage, with no concern for the public good, things would only get better. They would not. Rather, things likely would get worse. For things to get better, a focused national government, armed with well designed and determined programs, had to assume a more vigorous role in directing policy and anticipating the future. National governmental regulation of economic trusts, for example, would ensure that efficient big businesses would act in the public interest rather than only for wealthy owners. A potent national government could represent a publicly-interested intermediary in labor-capital disputes, acting as a balancing referee, also in the public interest. And so on. Croly thought that his nostrums represented a novel American response to modernity, balanced between alien European notions of socialism on the one hand, and unworkable laissez-faire individualism on the other. When the Great Crash of 1929 brought on the ensuing Great Depression, Croly's ideas seemed prescient. The country under Franklin Roosevelt was poised to carry forth with his prescriptions, and the age of American liberalism began to reach for its apex.

Croly approached his task in *The Promise* with a sweeping examination of American history, occasionally situating that history within a comparative analysis of European political developments. He then adumbrated a larger theory of American nationalism and a set of general policy recommendations. While insisting that "American government demands more rather than less centralization,"[6] he underscored his conviction that centralization was insufficient unless accompanied by

[5] Ibid., 7.
[6] Ibid., 274.

"the nationalization of American political, economic, and social life," which is different from and means more than merely "Federal centralization."[7] "Nationality"—almost a spiritual construct for Croly—envelops centralization, which is instrumental. So, ultimate loyalty is due the nation over the separate states, or local communities. A benign application of Croly's interpretation of "nationality" might lead to a unitary form of society, such as in France—where, for example, a national education policy provides that all children of the same age study the same curriculum at approximately the same time (unlike in the fragmented educational system of the United States). A less benign implication, noticed by some of Croly's liberal acolytes by mid twentieth century, might suggest a form of fascism. Such interpretive dissonance is informed by understanding two more aspects of Croly's thought. His system was (as Eric Rauchway and John Lloyd note herein) *vertical*, extending from the top—as from the Presidency or the elevated public intellectual—down to the affected, not *horizontal*, as in the Jacksonian conceit that everyone was equally capable of doing all important jobs in the country, irrespective of position, location, education, or class. Correspondingly, Croly emphasized *excellence* over mediocrity. And, in fairness, he supposed that his recommendations would provide the most useful means for ensuring that all equally could expect the opportunity to pursue excellence. It was just that, in the end, he wanted the best—that is most excellent—individuals in decision-making positions. Lincoln was his model.

By the end of the 1960s, the civil rights movement, a women's movement, student protests, an unpopular war in southeast Asia, and maybe the awkward strains of Crolyism—whether fathomed by the general public or not—had moved American liberalism's concerns beyond Croly's categories (a theme Edward Stettner elaborates in his chapter). The consensus Forcey thought he had discerned at the beginning of the decade began to erode. In 1955, William F. Buckley, Jr. founded *The National Review* as a conservative counter to ascendant liberal journals such as *The New Republic*. Senator Barry Goldwater ran an overtly "conservative" presidential campaign in 1964, specifically rejecting the Croly-induced liberalism of the New Deal and the Great Society, and attacking both Republicans and Democrats for being big-government liberals. That year, actor Ronald Reagan moved dramatically into the public eye with a televised, and widely seen, endorsement of Senator Goldwater. Although Goldwater lost in a landslide (and Lyndon Johnson's liberal Democratic Party looked to be very much in the political driver's

[7] Ibid., 273.

seat), retrospective analysis suggests that the Crolian liberal era was waning. In his inaugural address of 1981, newly-elected president Ronald Reagan announced, for all practical purposes, the end of Crolyism in national politics: "Government," the president declared, "is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem."[8]

But Crolyism did not go away. Imbedded in the body politic like a nourishing antibody, it lived on. While popular moves to effect "deregulation" proceeded apace, the federal bureaucracy actually grew and the national debt exploded under Reagan. Important national programs launched during the period of the 1930s through the 1960s (Social Security, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, for but a few examples) continued unscathed if nervous.[9] What had changed was the terrain of discourse, with conservative thinkers proliferating while liberals split into addressing discrete topics of gender relations, class conflict, racial division, ethnic and identity politics, environmental anxiety, and more. It was the "left," at times influenced by Marx, sometimes by the "linguistic turn"—and hostile as well to middle-of-the-road liberalism—that assumed the role of fundamental critic of the prevailing attitude. And, making matters more confusing, Reagan and his followers were, from a certain historic vantage, really "liberals," that is, in the pre-Croly definition of the term (Alberto Sahagun's essay helps us navigate this linguistic and historical quagmire). In the climate, Croly's place in America moved laterally from contemporary political discussion to academic study in college classes of American Intellectual History or Political Theory (but rarely into economics texts, as revealed in Cecilia Conrad's contribution to this anthology). *The Promise of American Life* was now seen as a historic relic of an interesting past time.

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[8] http://www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/first.asp: accessed September 19, 2008. president Reagan made the emphasis in his speech.

[9] Two of the bleakest financial challenges facing the United States in the years after the Reagan presidency—the Savings and Loan crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, and the severe credit crunch caused by the home mortgage collapse of 2008—each led to Croly-like national government responses. The Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act of 1989 established new federal regulatory agencies, such as the Office of Thrift Supervision, the Federal Housing Finance Board, and the Resolution Trust Corporation. The latter of these became a model for desperate attempts to staunch the 2008 collapse of several major financial firms. The remedies ultimately called upon all American taxpayers to support the rescue. In severe crises, Crolian "nationalism" won out over "conservative" individualism.

The essays that follow demonstrably belong in the genre of academic study. And yet, some authors hint at resuscitating Croly for purposes of current policy debates. We can see this most clearly in our final section: "Croly and Public Policies." Still, most contributors to this anthology sense at least a lingering Crolian presence in our time, thus rendering the one hundred year commemoration of *The Promise* less antiquarian than might first have been supposed.

One of the more interesting, and often pleasurable, challenges facing scholars of intellectual history is seeking to uncover the core influences on history's major thinkers. David Levy begins this book by offering up his carefully considered judgment that the French positivist philosopher Auguste Comte was far and away the main inspiration for Croly's thought. Levy concedes that there are counter views to his, and he does grant Croly a position of novelty in American letters. But he places Comte well on top of the list of Croly's intellectual mentors. In so doing, Levy draws us into a more intimate look at Croly's upbringing, and particularly his relationship with his father—David Goodman Croly—who was a Comte devotee and eagerly promoted the Frenchman's philosophy in the United States.

Complementing Levy's study, Alberto Sahagun situates Croly's *Promise* within a two-centuries-long evolution of liberal thought. Escorting into his discussion European political philosophers from the time of the French Revolution until the twentieth century, Sahagun explains how the chief aims of "liberalism" led its promoters to move from emphasis on resisting strong government to welcoming more potent governmental action. And noting that, by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Croly began to use the word "liberal" to describe his own philosophy, Sahagun then carries Crolyism right up to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, for which it provided substantial theoretical groundwork.

Commencing Part Two of this anthology, Edward Stettner provides a thorough study of the relationship between Croly and American liberalism as it developed from Croly's time until ours. He places Croly alongside renowned post-World War II theorists, and, in finely expounded exegeses, discovers in many instances intriguing, complementary, linkages that accord favorable stature to Croly's contributions to liberal thought. At the same time, Stettner does not draw back from listing Croly's lapses—for example, his racial views, which grate against current norms; his curious disregard for women's issues, including women's suffrage, and his ignoring the new, explosive immigration that was certainly evident in his

New York City milieu. Stettner also reminds us that late twentieth-century liberalism became concerned with issues that plainly would not have occurred to Croly. On balance, however, Stettner finds Croly undeniably worthy as a subject of study, even from the perspective of the twenty-first century.

Eric Rauchway closes out the second section of this anthology exploring Croly's connection with *The New Republic* and his keen desire as editor of the new publication to influence public policies. Possibly the most important personal relationship of Croly's life (except perhaps with his father) was his friendship with Willard and Dorothy Straight. The Straights, high society New York folk, were one of the more beguiling couples in early twentieth-century America. They also happened to be rich and used their riches to found the liberal journal that would become so closely associated with Croly. The new journal's editor and the Straights agreed on many guiding principles, and Rauchway's explication of their shared liberal *ideology* (the term seems appropriate) ends with a severe, if nuanced, critique of America's liberal reform demeanor. The Straights and Croly, according to Rauchway, saw themselves and their sort as the appropriate people to instigate and direct necessary reform. While their heart may have been in the right place, their elite disposition bestowed on American liberalism one of its putative shortcomings.

Part Three, specifically highlighting Croly's association with public policies, opens with an unanticipated question. Economist Cecilia Conrad asks why she has never heard of Herbert Croly. She then forwards a nimble account of the course of economics education during the twentieth century, informing us of the transformative mathematization of the discipline, one consequence of which was to remove narrative analysts like Croly from economics texts. Conrad, however, finds that Croly in fact has made some late appearances in limited studies by economists. Moreover, given certain enticing economic and financial parallels between his time and ours (however blurred by the separation of a century), Conrad is able to position Croly within current discussions on economic theory.

Labor history once was a staple of the college curriculum, and it was also a large topic in Croly's *Promise*. John Lloyd finds the earlier emphasis befitting of reexamination. But Lloyd revisits with an eye on the present as well as a grasp of labor history since Croly's time. He senses that Croly's ideas about labor were influenced in part by the news of the anthracite coal strike of 1902, and the subsequent ending of the strike due to presidential intervention. When Theodore Roosevelt forged a settlement that was deemed a balanced resolution of what was a bitter capital-labor standoff, Croly beheld a bold execution from his longed-for strong

national government and active presidency. Lloyd also notes that Croly took the position that labor unions should be recognized and protected by the national government. This apparently advanced policy position would achieve legislative sanction with the New Deal's National Labor Relations Act of 1935. Lloyd does not find this consummation entirely advantageous to labor. He sees defect in the provision of government support, since (as the Taft Hartley Law of 1947 showed) government can as easily take power away from labor as extend it. Moreover, the assumption that capital and labor enter the fray as equals has never been true. Labor is always at a disadvantage. From Lloyd's perspective, the Croly position on labor, often considered progressive, has shortcoming as well as advantages.

Although *The Promise of American Life* contained one chapter on foreign affairs, America's role in the world, then and now, is rarely considered a major topic of the book. But since the Great War began in Europe almost at the moment that Croly began to edit *The New Republic*, he was constrained to articulate a world view. To conclude this book, Jerry Pubantz provides an incisive account of Croly's foreign policy philosophy, his attempt to shape America's role in the world during his time, and his noteworthy impact on the course of America's foreign policy to now. Pubantz details what could be called Croly's "liberal internationalist" outlook, which contains the nascent promise and peculiar faults of liberals' expansive world stance. Pubantz conjoins Croly's accent on overarching nationalism and a vital presidency in domestic matters to his foreign policy counsel. Accordingly, Croly, in Pubantz's words, "captured in almost exact form how twentieth-century American foreign policy played out."

Herbert David Croly might be surprised, but he would surely be pleased, that this anthology will mark the 100th birthday of his most famous work. Born in New York City on January 23, 1869, Croly was reared in a lively, intellectual environment. His mother, Jane Cunningham Croly—who wrote under the pen name Jennie June—and his father, David Goodman Croly, were both writers for various newspapers and journals in New York, and both were committed to political and civic reform. Croly entered Harvard University in 1886 and studied there off and on until the end of the century, never taking a degree. In 1892, he married Louise Emory, a Baltimore socialite. Their marriage lasted until Croly's death. From 1900 to 1906 he edited *Architectural Record*, and most of his early writing was on architectural issues. His breakthrough, as we know, came with publication of *The Promise of American Life* in 1909. Croly wrote three other books, none as well-known as his first—*Marcus Alonzo*

Hanna: His Life and Times (1913), *Progressive Democracy* (1914), and *Willard Straight* (1924). In 1914, he became chief editor of *The New Republic*, a position he held officially until his death, May 17, 1930, from complications related to a paralytic stroke he suffered in 1928.

By all accounts, Croly was an extremely shy person. Some scholars suggest that his shyness was almost pathological. At staff meetings of *The New Republic* he spoke in a whisper, if speaking at all. And yet, his colleagues and acquaintances could be counted among the most prominent intellectuals of a vibrant New York City scene; many savored the honor of writing for him in his magazine. With the conclusion of World War I (known in Croly's time as The Great War), he descended into a kind of intellectual despair. An early supporter of Wilson's League of Nations, he reacted angrily to the Treaty of Versailles, which he saw as intolerable and unacceptable. The Republican ascendancy of the 1920s, which seemed either to reverse progressive gains or to use progressive tools for conservative purposes, contributed to souring his mood about politics. By dying in spring 1930 he was spared from observing the worst of the Great Depression but also from seeing the coming of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

Whether Croly's book (and his subsequent writings) is but an artifact of history past, or a source for future cogitation is uncertain at this birthday. And whatever Croly's flaws (and we will detail several in these pages), there remains some comfort in knowing that, during the American experience, bright, concerned, and singular individuals like Herbert Croly have absorbed, pondered, and even conceived, big ideas. In addition, by thinking hard about the whole nation and its possibilities, and by trying to influence the course of history, Croly has provided us the inducement for ongoing, and, let us trust, constructive meditation about who we are and how we can do better.

PART ONE

HERBERT CROLY'S *PROMISE* IN HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF CROLY'S *PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE*

DAVID W. LEVY

I

That Herbert Croly's *Promise of American Life*, the book whose centennial we are marking this year, is one of the monumental documents in the history of American political thought few specialists in the field would deny. The book, which established Croly, in Walter Lippmann's words, as "the first important political philosopher who appeared in America in the twentieth century,"[1] stands at the forefront of the theoretical underpinning of modern liberalism in the United States. "To omit Croly's *Promise* from any list of half a dozen books on American politics since 1900," wrote his friend Felix Frankfurter, "would be grotesque. It became a reservoir for all political writing after its publication."[2] The important intellectual and diplomat, Robert Morss Lovett, thought that the book "lifted the study of political science in American colleges to a higher plane,"[3] and John Chamberlain, an early historian of the Progressive Era, believed that Croly's *Promise* was "a book whose influence spread in a wide circular ripple...."[4] Numerous historians of American political ideas have testified similarly to the book's

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[1] Walter Lippmann, "Notes for a Biography," *New Republic* 63 (July 16, 1930): 250.

[2] Felix Frankfurter, "Herbert Croly and American Political Opinion," *New Republic* 63 (July 16, 1930): 247.

[3] Robert Morss Lovett, "Herbert Croly's Contribution to American Life," *New Republic* 63 (July 16, 1930): 245.

[4] John Chamberlain, *Farewell to Reform: The Rise, Life and Decay of the Progressive Mind in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965 edition), 223.

lasting influence in shaping the national discourse on both political philosophy and measures of practical policy.

Tracing the intellectual origins of this path-breaking book requires a clear understanding of the central argument that Croly put forward. I propose, therefore, to begin by offering a brief summary of what I think that argument was. I caution that this will be my own "reading" of the book and that others may have differing views.

II

Croly began *The Promise of American Life* with a lengthy review of American history, but it is in that examination of the past that he set the terms for the argument he wished to make and where he prepared the groundwork for the specific policy suggestions he hoped to place before the American people. Consequently, those opening chapters were particularly crucial for the suggestions that followed; they are also crucial for understanding the book's intellectual origins. In those chapters Croly contended that the pioneer period of American history, the period stretching from the Revolution through the Civil War, bequeathed three formative legacies to the nation.

First, from the start, Americans held a highly optimistic view of the future of their country. Their belief in the better life that was to come, Croly called "the promise of American life." "From the beginning," he wrote in the third paragraph of his book, "Americans have been anticipating and projecting a better future. From the beginning the Land of Democracy has been figured as the Land of Promise."[5] In large part, of course, this expectation of a better future was economic. "America has been peopled by Europeans primarily because they expected in that country to make more money more easily."[6] But the vision of the better future was never entirely materialistic. Another element in the projected "promise" was the anticipation of an ever-expanding personal freedom, guaranteed by free and democratic institutions. Greater prosperity and greater freedom, Croly thought, were linked together in the minds of Americans: "Our democratic institutions became in a sense the guarantee that prosperity would continue to be abundant and accessible," he argued. "In case the majority of good Americans were not prosperous, there would be grave reasons for suspecting that our institutions were not doing their

[5] Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 3. All of the various editions of the book employ the same pagination.
[6] Ibid., 9.

duty."[7] And Croly added still another element to this already ambitious hope for a better future ("a pervasive economic prosperity guaranteed by free institutions"). With greater prosperity and more freedom, Americans expected a better sort of human being to emerge. As Croly put it: "The implication was, and still is, that by virtue of the more comfortable and less trammeled lives which Americans were enabled to lead, they would constitute a better society and would become in general a worthier set of men."[8] Give them prosperity and freedom, and they will respond in moral and social terms. So the first great inheritance of the formative period of American history was this widely held faith in the promise of American life: that the country would continue to be more prosperous and more free, and that its citizens would take advantage of these opportunities to become better people.

The second legacy of the pioneer period was that persistent division in political philosophy between Jeffersonianism and Hamiltonianism—and one supposes that anyone who knows anything at all about Croly's book will know this aspect of it. On the one side stood Alexander Hamilton's advocacy of "a vigorous, positive, constructive national policy.... a policy that implied a faith in the powers of an efficient government to advance the national interest," but which was, alas, gravely marred by Hamilton's distrust of the common people and his insistence on basing "the perpetuation of the Union upon the interested motives of a minority of well-to-do citizens."[9] On the other side were the views of Thomas Jefferson, who had the merit of "a sincere, indiscriminate, and unlimited faith in the American people" and who was "wholly right in believing that his country was nothing, if not a democracy." But Jefferson's philosophy, again alas, suffered from an inadequate view of what that democracy should be: he saw only a "collection of individuals, fundamentally alike in their abilities and deserts.... democracy [to him] was tantamount to extreme individualism." And this led him both to his profound faith in the independent individual and to his deep and pernicious suspicion of an active and vigorous central government.[10] Croly made a frank confession regarding "this double perversion,"[11] this tragic division between Hamilton's inadequate concept of nationalism (inadequate because it left out democracy) and Jefferson's inadequate concept of democracy (inadequate because it left out nationalism): Croly declared, "I shall not

[7] Ibid., 11.
[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid., 40 – 41.
[10] Ibid., 42 – 43.
[11] Ibid., 29.

disguise the fact that, on the whole, my preferences are on the side of Hamilton rather than of Jefferson."[12] But unfortunately, it was Jefferson who, in the competition for conceptualizing America's political future, won the battle. "During the next fifty years," Croly sadly reported, "the American democracy accepted almost literally this Jeffersonian tradition." What Croly called "the triumph of Jefferson and the defeat of Hamilton" has meant the triumph of unfettered individualism and the ascendancy of a suspicious and irrational anti-nationalism.[13]

The third great legacy of the pioneer period, according to Croly, was the iconic figure of the western democrat. That figure (who Croly described exclusively in male terms and who was probably thought of that way by most Americans, both long before and long after him) became the ideal social type, a model for the whole society, a revered symbol for the nation. Croly presented an admirably balanced picture of this uniquely American type. He praised the pioneer's energy, his vitality, and his practicality—traits which Croly saw as useful and also responsible for the upbuilding of American society out of a wilderness. Above all, Croly praised the western democrat's simple informality, neighborliness, ease of intercourse—traits which were essential to the success of a democratic society. On the other hand, Croly thought that we had to give serious attention to at least two negative aspects of the pioneer's character. He was preoccupied with getting rich and that preoccupation obscured every other consideration; and, because the premium on the frontier was on versatility, there developed "a distrust and aversion [of] the man with a special vocation and high standards of achievement." The expert, the specialist, the man of high standards and of special knowledge and special skill was regarded as a threat to the "rough good-fellowship" and homogeneity of the community. This led to a deep-seated suspicion of moral and intellectual excellence.

Thus the pioneer period of American history, according to Croly, was critical—not only because it began the business of settling a continent and setting a nation firmly on its way, but because it bequeathed this triple legacy to succeeding generations. And the author of *The Promise* had two more things to say about this legacy. First, he judged that, in general, through most of the nineteenth century this combination of the pioneer individualist, a weak Jeffersonian government, and the promise of American life all worked together with reasonable smoothness. Selfish pioneers pursued their own interests as the government stood aside, and in

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 48 – 49.

the process they helped to achieve the promise of American life. But, secondly, this legacy, Croly believed, had ceased to function smoothly in the modern world.

After the Civil War, "a lively, even a frenzied, outburst of industrial, commercial, and speculative activity followed hard upon the restoration of peace," and this outburst was "the most important fact in American life during the forty years" since Appomattox.[14] The results of this economic transformation were momentous. They included a division of the American people into interest groups and classes in an unprecedented way; the narrowing of economic opportunity; and the need for specialists to replace the all-around western democrat (Croly discussed at length three newly emerging specialists: the captain of industry; the political boss; and the labor organizer). Perhaps the most ominous result of the economic explosion after the Civil War was the disruption of the harmony that had once characterized the elements of the pioneer legacy. In the past the easygoing but privately ambitious western democrat and the weak Jeffersonian government had worked compatibly to achieve the promise. But now, Croly insisted, if the better future implied by the promise was to be achieved, the nation required a new and different sort of government and a new sort of citizen.

The main part of the book presents Croly's explication of what that new government should look like—its combination of democracy and nationalism (the famous union of Jeffersonian ends to be achieved by Hamiltonian means), and its incorporation of Croly's specific recommendations and judgments: about particular policies and programs; about individual political leaders such as William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt; about what kind of reform was helpful and what kind was retrograde; about diminished roles for state governments; about an appropriate foreign policy for such an awakened nation; about what to do about trusts and labor unions; and so on.

And then there is that perplexing final chapter of *The Promise of American Life*, the chapter which many readers and commentators have found mystical and incongruent with the rest of the book. That chapter cannot be understood, I believe, unless it is seen as containing Croly's recommendations for a new kind of citizen, a constructive alternative to the western democrat. If the preceding chapters contained his prescription for the new kind of government that was necessary to achieve the promise, the book's last chapter contained his call for the kind of American who would now be needed, one who would surrender some of his accustomed

[14] Ibid., 101.

selfish and single-minded individualism for allegiance and loyalty to the new, vibrant, communal national state.

III

Where did these ideas of Croly come from? This is not an easily answered question. Trying to locate the intellectual origins of *The Promise* has enlisted the efforts of a notable cluster of scholars, offering, surprisingly, a wide disparity of conclusions. This disparity can be illustrated by a brief look at the two most authoritative early analysts of Croly's book. David Noble probed Croly's writings on several occasions during the 1950s[15] and concluded that German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel imparted the decisive influence to *The Promise*. "It is clear," Noble summarized his view, "that Croly, a serious student of philosophy, when faced with the problem of creating a theory of social reform that would replace the ideas sanctioned by Herbert Spencer, was unable to escape from principles very similar to the other important philosophic tradition of the late nineteenth century, Hegelian idealism."[16] Noble reached this conclusion on the basis of the fact that both Hegel and Croly exalted the nation-state; unable to account for the many differences between Hegel and Croly, Noble faulted Croly for "arguments which were inescapably tortuous and somewhat contradictory." The other early commentator was Charles Forcey, whose thoroughly-researched and influential book of 1961, *Crossroads of Liberalism*, must be the beginning of any serious research on Croly. Forcey arrived at a conclusion not merely different from Noble's, but directly opposite. Impressed by the absence of doctrinaire absolutes in *The Promise of American Life*, Forcey concluded that "Croly took the pragmatism of William James as his creed," and that "pragmatism was Croly's guiding philosophy during his most active years as publicist and editor."[17]

Since then, other scholars have attempted to trace the origins of Herbert Croly's ideas in *The Promise*. Certainly the two most intelligent,

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[15] David Noble, "Herbert Croly and American Progressive Thought," *Western Political Quarterly* 7 (December 1954): 537 – 53; and *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 34 – 77..

[16] Noble, "Croly and Progressive Thought," 541. See also *Paradox of Progressive Thought*, 65.

[17] Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann and the Progressive Era, 1900 – 1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 20. See also, Forcey's "Introduction" to the Dutton edition of *The Promise of American Life*, xiv – xv.

influential, and important of these have been James Kloppenberg and Edward Stettner. Kloppenberg, in a brilliant book of 1986, argued that Croly must be seen as part of a trans-Atlantic group of philosophers and social thinkers who, between 1870 and 1920, were searching for a middle way between traditional laissez faire liberalism and revolutionary socialism.[18] Professor Stettner, in his very fine book of 1993, argued that *The Promise* cannot be understood properly unless we see it as Croly's attempt to shape traditional liberal ideas in response to the progressive movement that was swirling around him.[19] Another commentator, Kevin C. Murphy of Columbia University, acknowledged other explanations of Croly's ideas, but then added: "While taking these theories into account, I also want to locate Croly's argument in two other American intellectual traditions that I think resonate throughout his book—the political philosophy of civic republicanism and the moral perfectionism of Ralph Waldo Emerson."[20]

Thus, Croly's ideas in *The Promise* have been seen as deriving from a variety of sources. I must stress two more matters about this controversy before recklessly hurling my own view into this jumble of explanations. First, the entire discussion has been carried on in an unusually respectful and civilized way—the various views have been put forward vigorously while, in general, acknowledging and seriously considering the merits of the other views; the whole give-and-take has been, in other words, a model of the way scholarly debate should be conducted. And second, all the scholars agree on one thing: Croly's views derive from a variety of places. One of Stettner's purposes, as he wrote in the Preface of his book, was "to explain the many influences on his thought"[21] and, at the conclusion of his discussion of *The Promise*, while calling the book "an extraordinary theoretical achievement," he suggested that the reason Croly's argument "was not fully clarified" was because "Croly did not want to choose among his many somewhat contradictory emphases."[22] Similarly, Kloppenberg had previously concluded that "there seems to me no reason to deny the evidence that Croly's ideas were shaped by a variety of

[18] James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870 – 1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). His discussion of Croly is in Chapter 8, especially 311ff.
[19] Edward Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).
[20] http://www.kevincmurphy.com/hebertcroly.htm; accessed December 12, 2007.
[21] Stetner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, x.
[22] Ibid., 56.

sources that were in no way consistent with one another."[23] Therefore, the various contending parties often end up arguing about what particular influence is "most important" or "at the core" of *The Promise of American Life* and what influences are secondary or subordinate.

IV

I wish to put forward my own view of what lies at the core and what at the periphery of Herbert Croly's book, adding yet another view to those that have already been registered. I hope to persuade readers that at the book's center are the teachings of the French philosopher, Auguste Comte, as transmitted to Herbert Croly by his father, the prominent journalist, editor, and social critic, David Goodman Croly. This is the argument I made in my biography of Croly,[24] and I must warn, in advance, that both Professor Stettner and Professor Kloppenberg think that I have over-emphasized Auguste Comte's influence.[25] Naturally, I think that I have not. But I am quick to acknowledge that the opinions of two scholars of such intelligence and thoroughness as those two are not to be taken lightly. I intend to make the strongest case I can for Comte, then indicate what I think are the peripheral influences on the book, leaving, as is proper, the final judgment to others. If I cannot persuade readers that Croly's most important ideas came from Comte, I hope that they will at least conclude that Comte deserves an important place at the table when considering the reasoning that went into Croly's book.

This strategy, of course, requires a brief excursion into Auguste Comte's ideas, stressing those parts of his thought that bear the most distinct relationship to Croly's ideas in *The Promise*.

Comte lived from 1798 to 1857, and his work is often divided into two distinct phases; he himself spoke of having two careers. Between 1830 and 1842, while still in his thirties and early forties, Comte published his most important work, the six-volume opus that first appeared in English, translated by Harriet Martineau in 1853 under the title *The Positive Philosophy*. The book began by proclaiming the law of three stages. All of the departments of human thought, Comte announced, invariably evolve through three phases: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. In the theological stage mankind spontaneously ascribes causation to some

[23] Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 489.
[24] David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of An American Progressive* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
[25] See Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 489, and Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, x.

supernatural being whose will is responsible for observed phenomena and who must be appeased or worshiped. The evolution in that first stage proceeds through fetishism and polytheism and finds its completion in monotheism, the most sophisticated form of explanation in the theological stage. In the second, or metaphysical stage, Comte continued, phenomena are accounted for, not by attribution to gods, but by reference to some impersonal abstraction; some non-material power or entity or force is believed somehow to actuate and explain phenomena. And just as the theological stage culminated in a single God, so the metaphysical culminated in a single abstract force, Nature. The real importance of the metaphysical stage, according to Comte, lies in its transitional character. It lifts us away from the passive superstition of the first phase and raises us to a level from which we can approach the third. In the positive, or scientific stage, mankind finally gives up the fruitless search for Absolutes or Essences or Final Causes, and begins to search for answers in the phenomena themselves—we begin to reconstruct thought on the basis of our own empirical experiences and finally realize, as Comte put it, that "there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts."[26] All of the sciences pass through these three stages. Comte then ranked the sciences and, in 350 pages, traced each of them through the three phases—mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and finally, sociology.

It is Comte's analysis of the final science, the least developed one, sociology, that had particular relevance for Herbert Croly's thought. Sociology (some say that Comte deserves to be considered the founder of the discipline itself), like the other sciences, must be put on a positive basis. "The general revolution of the human mind is nearly accomplished. We have only to complete the Positive Philosophy by bringing Social phenomena within its comprehension."[27]

The theological polity, Comte argued, had attained its peak in the "Catholic and feudal system" of the late Middle Ages. As was the case in all the other sciences, so in sociology, the metaphysical phase had a double task: to destroy theological foolishness and to set the stage for positive progress. In battering down the fortifications of the old theological system, the metaphysical took up weapons most suitable for the siege. Since the theological polity stressed Order, the metaphysical adopted the battle cry of Progress. Since the old system cherished stability, the new brandished

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[26] August Comte, *The Positive Philosophy Freely Translated and Condensed by Harriet Martineau, in Three Volumes* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896 edition), I: 3. Comte outlined the law of the three stages at I: 1 – 3.
[27] Ibid., I: 16.

the sword of revolution. Since the old saw the temporal subordinate to the spiritual, the revolutionary metaphysical school demanded a separation of the two with the spiritual in the inferior position. Since the old relied upon rigid hierarchies, the new preached human equality. And since the old talked about "the will of God," the new stressed "human rights" and "the will of the people."

But then, Comte argued, a curious thing happened. The metaphysical polity (which deserves our gratitude for destroying its theological predecessor) turned itself into an absolute dogma. The tactics and the ideology of the revolutionary party were obviously designed as tools of destruction, not as building blocks for a new society. The notion of "liberty of conscience," for example, was once necessary for the dissolution of the old order; in the nineteenth century, however, "it constitutes an obstacle to reorganization, now that its activity is no longer absorbed by the demolition of the old political order."[28] Likewise, the idea of "equality" was useful in combating feudal distinctions; but now that it is made absolute it stands in the way of those classifications needed for the scientific reorganization of society.[29] Perhaps most serious of all, the antagonism to the ancient order and the understandable desire to limit its powers has now ossified into a terribly dangerous tendency "to represent all government as being the enemy of society." The revolutionary, metaphysical party has bequeathed "a perpetual suspicion and vigilance, restricting the activity of government more and more, in order to guard against its encroachments, so as to reduce it at length to mere functions of police, in no way participating in the supreme direction of collective action and social development."[30]

What must happen in the realm of political thought is the same as what has happened in each of the other sciences, emergence of the "Positive Philosophy." It is "the only possible agent in the reorganization of modern society."[31] Minds which rebelled against theological fictions and were uneasy about metaphysical abstractions will now eagerly submit to a scientific study of society. They will search for laws of human behavior on the basis of direct scientific observation, and will direct their activities in harmony with the newly discovered scientific laws. I will give one example directly relevant to Croly's ideas. It is incontestable, Comte argued, that human society is characterized by ever-increasing complexity. The resulting specialization of functions is simultaneously a product of

[28] Ibid., II: 152.
[29] Ibid., II: 154 – 56.
[30] Ibid., II: 150.
[31] Ibid., II: 182.