Herbert Croly and Liberal Democracy

Sidney A Pearson, Jr.

The political thought of Herbert Croly tends to be cited more often than it is seriously read. Eric Goldman, one of the most distinguished historians of the Progressive Movement, regarded the neglect of Croly’s ideas as “a serious hole in the intellectual history of modern America.” This neglect has been partly rectified since Goldman wrote his now classic history of the Progressive Movement. There is probably more interest in Croly today than anytime since his heyday in the years before World War I. The revival of interest seems to be motivated, in large part, by a perception that the tradition of liberal-progressivism, with which Croly is inescapably linked, is either breaking down or at least facing unprecedented challenges in the late twentieth century. The politics of liberal-progressivism have been challenged in the last quarter of the twentieth century more forcefully than at any time since Croly wrote his influential works and founded The New Republic magazine in 1914. Liberals within the tradition Croly helped to found are having an especially difficult time trying to understand the arguments of the political-intellectual forces that are arrayed against them. This is due in no small measure to a failure to understand the origins of liberal-progressivism itself. Exploring the scope and depth of progressive-liberalism is a difficult task in large part because it is a living tradition in American politics and, as such, continues to exert a powerful paradigmatic influence on the general interpretation of current American politics and political history. Whatever the interpretation of this tradition, the work of Herbert Croly is inexorably intertwined with it and cannot be adequately understood apart from his influence. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the progressive-liberal tradition are very much bound-up with the work of Herbert Croly and it is for that reason that a rediscovery of his work is very much in order at the present time.

Any neglect of Croly would be an unfortunate fate for a writer who was so influential in his own day and who, through that influence, has continued to help define the progressive-liberal tradition since its formative years. Croly helped to give the Progressive Movement some of its most articulate expression in the opening decades of the twentieth century—perhaps better than any other single writer. His thought continues to be one of the defining reference points of progressive-liberalism. Croly was a serious student of the American regime and if his arguments are open to criticism it should be criticism at the highest level of regime analysis. His interpretation of the nature of the American regime is at once both subtle and distinctive. It bears many of the hallmarks of the Progressive Movement in general but retains an independence that keeps it from becoming simply a storehouse of conventional liberal wisdom. It is wholly appropriate to consider Croly in the historical context of the Progressive Movement, but it would be equally inappropriate to leave it at that.
The first and most serious problem of interpreting Croly’s political thought begins with the enormous influence exerted by his best known work, *The Promise of American Life* (1909). It was perhaps the most influential single work of the Progressive era. It is certainly the most oft-cited work. But it is a difficult work to read and not merely because of “its tortuous prose,” as Goldman has described it. The problem begins with the underlying political philosophy in *The Promise of American Life* that is often either understated, or simply implied in the larger context of his advocacy of miscellaneous reform proposals, or else presented unsystematically as a series of seemingly random critiques of Jeffersonian democracy without fully embracing the Hamiltonian alternative. Further, Croly’s occasional criticisms of various aspects of the Progressive Movement itself seem to be an enigma to readers who know Croly only or primarily through this one work. Yet it is precisely Croly’s philosophical critique of American constitutionalism that may be the most enduring legacy of his thought. A systematic science of politics and society, as Croly understood the terms, was not incidental with him, but was one of the driving passions of his intellectual life. Any neglect of Croly’s systematic interest in a scientific social science could not do justice either to his thought or its continuing influence. And his most mature, systematic science of politics as applied to an analysis of the American regime is not found in *The Promise of American Life*, important as that work is, but rather his later work, *Progressive Democracy* (1914).

Croly’s personal contribution to the political thought of the Progressive Movement and to the tradition of progressive-liberalism unfolded in three significant works published in rapid succession: *The Promise of American Life* (1909), Marcus Alonzo Elanna: *Elis Life and Work* (1912), and *Progressive Democracy* (1914). His personal influence expanded considerably when he and several other influential writers founded *The New Republic* magazine in 1914. But it is in *Progressive Democracy* that we read not only Croly’s most mature thought, but also one of the genuine, if underappreciated, classics of progressive-liberalism. It deserves to stand by itself as one of the enduring liberal commentaries on American democracy. And if much of the underlying political philosophy seems to be paradigmatic of the progressive-liberal tradition since the New Deal, it should be remembered that such was not the case in 1914.

The social-political science of the Progressive Movement and Croly’s place in it are best understood as a critique the political science of the Founders. The Progressives were not simply “republicans with a new suit of clothes,” but were rather a new type of democrat in the American regime. It was the conscious aim of Croly and the Progressive Movement to establish American government on fundamentally different principles than those of the original Founders. In order to accomplish this task within the context of the existing Constitution they fashioned a social-political science that was drawn from sources and principles often quite foreign to either the Federalist or the Anti-Federalist arguments of the late eighteenth century. They were a new species of democratic philosopher in America: “progressive-liberals” in their own self-interpretation and consciously in opposition to many of the fundamental principles of republican government as the Founders had used the term. Croly in particular saw his social-political science as architectonic; that is, political science in the large sense of the term, a union of theory and practice with a scientific philosophy seeking an understanding of specifically political things. He was concerned not only with specific details of how the Constitution worked in practice, but with the political science upon which it was built. And it is because Croly consciously attempted to analyze politics at the highest level that we can read and critique him at the highest level of analysis. We can best understand the nature of that critique and its implications if we first examine the general structure of the Founders’ political science.

The founding debates over the nature of popular government are the reference point from which Croly and most of the Progressives took their bearings, and so must we As Croly explained the purpose of *Progressive Democracy*, it was not simply to map-out a tactical plan of reform. “My object,” he said, “has not been to recommend a particular plan of state political organization as the only plan which will meet the needs of a progressive democracy. What I have tried to do has been to explain the needs and requirements of a genuinely popular system of representative government.” What needs to be considered in any evaluation of Croly’s thought is what this means and whether his vision of representative government is similar to the founding principles of the American regime. The ultimate success of the progressive-liberal tradition in American politics is measured by both its theory and its practice. Its practice is beyond the scope of this introduction to Croly. But its theory is very much linked to Croly, and any discussion of its practice needs to be set against a backdrop of its philosophical foundations.