

Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1909)

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Herbert Croly (1869 – 1930) was an American progressive thinker who co-founded of *The New Republic*.

The moral and social aspiration proper to American life is, of course, the aspiration vaguely described by the word democratic; and the actual achievement of the American nation points towards an adequate and fruitful definition of the democratic ideal. Americans are usually satisfied by a most inadequate verbal description of democracy, but their national achievement implies one which is much more comprehensive and formative. In order to be true to their past, the increasing comfort and economic independence of an ever increasing proportion of the population must be secured, and it must be secured by a combination of individual effort and proper political organization...

The fault in the vision of our national future possessed by the ordinary American does not consist in the expectation of some continuity of achievement. It consists rather in the expectation that the familiar benefits will continue to accumulate automatically. In his mind the ideal Promise is identified with the processes and conditions which hitherto have very much simplified its fulfillment, and he fails sufficiently to realize that the conditions and processes are one thing and the ideal Promise quite another. Moreover, these underlying social and economic conditions are themselves changing, in such wise that hereafter the ideal Promise, instead of being automatically fulfilled, may well be automatically stifled...

The very genuine experience upon which American optimistic fatalism rests, is equivalent, because of its limitations, to a dangerous inexperience, and of late years an increasing number of Americans have been drawing this inference. They have been coming to see themselves more as others see them; and as an introduction to a consideration of this more critical frame of mind, I am going to quote another foreigner's view of American life,—the foreigner in this case being an Englishman and writing in 1893.

"The American note," says Mr. James Muirhead in his "Land of Contrasts," "includes a sense of illimitable expansion and possibility, an almost childlike confidence in human ability and fearlessness of both the present and the future, a wider realization of human brotherhood than has yet existed, a greater theoretical willingness to judge by the individual than by the class, a breezy indifference to authority and a positive predilection for innovation, a marked alertness of mind, and a manifold variety of interest—above all, an inextinguishable hopefulness and courage. It is easy to lay one's finger in America upon almost every one of the great defects of

civilization—even those defects which are specially characteristic of the civilization of the Old World. The United States cannot claim to be exempt from manifestations of economic slavery, of grinding the faces of the poor, of exploitation of the weak, of unfair distribution of wealth, of unjust monopoly, of unequal laws, of industrial and commercial chicanery, of disgraceful ignorance, of economic fallacies, of public corruption, of interested legislation, of want of public spirit, of vulgar boasting and chauvinism, of snobbery, of class prejudice, of respect of persons, and of a preference of the material over the spiritual. In a word, America has not attained, or nearly attained, perfection. But below and behind, and beyond all its weakness and evils, there is the grand fact of a noble national theory founded on reason and conscience." The reader will remark in the foregoing quotation that Mr. Muirhead is equally emphatic in his approval and in his disapproval. He generously recognizes almost as much that is good about Americans and their ways as our most vivacious patriotic orators would claim, while at the same time he has marshaled an army of abuses and sins which sound like an echo of the pages of the *London Saturday Review*. In the end he applies a friendly dash of whitewash by congratulating us on the "grand fact of our noble national theory," but to a discerning mind the consolation is not very consoling. The trouble is that the sins with which America is charged by Mr. Muirhead are flagrant violations of our noble national theory. So far as his charges are true, they are a denial that the American political and economic organization is accomplishing the results which its traditional claims require. If, as Mr. Muirhead charges, Americans permit the existence of economic slavery, if they grind the face of the poor, if they exploit the weak and distribute wealth unjustly, if they allow monopolies to prevail and laws to be unequal, if they are disgracefully ignorant, politically corrupt, commercially unscrupulous, socially snobbish, vulgarly boastful, and morally coarse,—if the substance of the foregoing indictment is really true, why, the less that is said about a noble national theory, the better. A man who is a sturdy sinner all the week hardly improves his moral standing by attending church on Sunday and professing a noble Christian theory of life. There must surely be some better way of excusing our sins than by raising aloft a noble theory of which these sins are a glaring violation.

I have quoted from Mr. Muirhead, not because his antithetic characterization of American life is very illuminating, but because of the precise terms of his charges against America. His indictment is practically equivalent to the assertion that the American system is not, or at least is no longer, achieving as much as has been claimed on its behalf. A democratic system may permit undefiled the existence of many sins and abuses, but it cannot permit the exploitation of the ordinary man by means of unjust laws and institutions. Neither can this indictment be dismissed without argument. When Mr. Muirhead's book was written sixteen years ago, the majority of good Americans would assuredly have read the charge with an incredulous smile; but in the year 1909 they might behave differently. The sins of which Mr. Muirhead accused Americans sixteen years ago are substantially the sins of which to-day they are accusing themselves—or rather one another. 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. A considerable proportion of the American people is beginning to exhibit economic and political, as well as personal, discontent. A generation ago the implication was that if a man remained poor and needy, his poverty was his own fault, because the American system was giving all its citizens a fair chance. Now, however, the discontented poor are beginning to charge their poverty to an unjust political and economic organization, and reforming agitators do not hesitate to support them in this contention. Manifestly a threatened obstacle has been raised against the anticipated realization of our national Promise. Unless the great majority of Americans not only have, but believe they have, a fair chance, the better American future will be dangerously compromised.

The conscious recognition of grave national abuses casts a deep shadow across the traditional American patriotic vision. The sincere and candid reformer can no longer consider the national Promise as destined to automatic fulfillment. The reformers themselves are, no doubt, far from believing that whatever peril there is cannot be successfully averted. They make a point of being as patriotically prophetic as the most "old-fashioned Democrat." They proclaim even more loudly their conviction of an indubitable and a beneficent national future. But they do not and cannot believe that this future will take care of itself. As reformers they are bound to assert that the national body requires for the time being a good deal of medical attendance, and many of them anticipate that even after the doctors have discontinued their daily visits the patient will still need the supervision of a sanitary specialist. He must be persuaded to behave so that he will not easily fall ill again, and so that his health will be permanently improved. Consequently, just in so far as reformers are reformers they are obliged to abandon the traditional American patriotic fatalism. The national Promise has been transformed into a closer equivalent of a national purpose, the fulfillment of which is a matter of conscious work.

The transformation of the old sense of a glorious national destiny into the sense of a serious national purpose will inevitably tend to make the popular realization of the Promise of American life both more explicit and more serious. As long as Americans believed they were able to fulfill a noble national Promise merely by virtue of maintaining intact a set of political institutions and by the vigorous individual pursuit of private ends, their allegiance to their national fulfillment remained more a matter of words than of deeds; but now that they are being aroused from their patriotic slumber, the effect is inevitably to disentangle the national idea and to give it more dignity. The redemption of the national Promise has become a cause for which the good American must fight, and the cause for which a man fights is a cause which he more than ever values. The American idea is no longer to be propagated merely by multiplying the children of the West and by granting ignorant aliens permission to vote. Like all sacred causes, it must be propagated by the Word and by that right arm of the Word, which is the Sword.

The more enlightened reformers are conscious of the additional dignity and value which the popularity of reform has bestowed upon the American idea, but they still fail to realize the

deeper implications of their own programme. In abandoning the older conception of an automatic fulfillment of our national destiny, they have abandoned more of the traditional American point of view than they are aware. The traditional American optimistic fatalism was not of accidental origin, and it cannot be abandoned without involving in its fall some other important ingredients in the accepted American tradition. Not only was it dependent on economic conditions which prevailed until comparatively recent times, but it has been associated with certain erroneous but highly cherished political theories. It has been wrought into the fabric of our popular economic and political ideas to such an extent that its overthrow necessitates a partial revision of some of the most important articles in the traditional American creed.

The extent and the character of this revision may be inferred from a brief consideration of the effect upon the substance of our national Promise of an alteration in its proposed method of fulfillment. The substance of our national Promise has consisted, as we have seen, of an improving popular economic condition, guaranteed by democratic political institutions, and resulting in moral and social amelioration. These manifold benefits were to be obtained merely by liberating the enlightened self-interest of the American people. The beneficent result followed inevitably from the action of wholly selfish motives—provided, of course, the democratic political system of equal rights was maintained in its integrity. The fulfillment of the American Promise was considered inevitable because it was based upon a combination of self-interest and the natural goodness of human nature. On the other hand, if the fulfillment of our national Promise can no longer be considered inevitable, if it must be considered as equivalent to a conscious national purpose instead of an inexorable national destiny, the implication necessarily is that the trust reposed in individual self-interest has been in some measure betrayed. No pre-established harmony can then exist between the free and abundant satisfaction of private needs and the accomplishment of a morally and socially desirable result. The Promise of American life is to be fulfilled—not merely by a maximum amount of economic freedom, but by a certain measure of discipline; not merely by the abundant satisfaction of individual desires, but by a large measure of individual subordination and self-denial. And this necessity of subordinating the satisfaction of individual desires to the fulfillment of a national purpose is attached particularly to the absorbing occupation of the American people,—the occupation, viz.: of accumulating wealth. The automatic fulfillment of the American national Promise is to be abandoned, if at all, precisely because the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth.

In making the concluding statement of the last paragraph I am venturing, of course, upon very debatable ground. Neither can I attempt in this immediate connection to offer any justification for the statement which might or should be sufficient to satisfy a stubborn skeptic. I must be content for the present with the bare assertion that the prevailing abuses and sins, which have made reform necessary, are all of them associated with the prodigious concentration of wealth, and of the power exercised by wealth, in the hands of a few men. I am far from believing that

this concentration of economic power is wholly an undesirable thing, and I am also far from believing that the men in whose hands this power is concentrated deserve, on the whole, any exceptional moral reprobation for the manner in which it has been used. In certain respects they have served their country well, and in almost every respect their moral or immoral standards are those of the great majority of their fellow-countrymen. But it is none the less true that the political corruption, the unwise economic organization, and the legal support afforded to certain economic privileges are all under existing conditions due to the malevolent social influence of individual and incorporated American wealth; and it is equally true that these abuses, and the excessive "money power" with which they are associated, have originated in the peculiar freedom which the American tradition and organization have granted to the individual. Up to a certain point that freedom has been and still is beneficial. Beyond that point it is not merely harmful; it is by way of being fatal. Efficient regulation there must be; and it must be regulation which will strike, not at the symptoms of the evil, but at its roots. 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. The inference which follows may be disagreeable, but it is not to be escaped. In becoming responsible for the subordination of the individual to the demand of a dominant and constructive national purpose, the American state will in effect be making itself responsible for a morally and socially desirable distribution of wealth.

The consequences, then, of converting our American national destiny into a national purpose are beginning to be revolutionary. When the Promise of American life is conceived as a national ideal, whose fulfillment is a matter of arduous and laborious work, the effect thereof is substantially to identify the national purpose with the social problem. What the American people of the present and the future have really been promised by our patriotic prophecies is an attempt to solve that problem. They have been promised on American soil comfort, prosperity, and the opportunity for self-improvement; and the lesson of the existing crisis is that such a Promise can never be redeemed by an indiscriminate individual scramble for wealth. The individual competition, even when it starts under fair conditions and rules, results, not only, as it should, in the triumph of the strongest, but in the attempt to perpetuate the victory; and it is this attempt which must be recognized and forestalled in the interest of the American national purpose. The way to realize a purpose is, not to leave it to chance, but to keep it loyally in mind, and adopt means proper to the importance and the difficulty of the task. No voluntary association of individuals, resourceful and disinterested though they be, is competent to assume the responsibility. The problem belongs to the American national democracy, and its solution must be attempted chiefly by means of official national action...