

■ From *The Promise of American Life*

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Author: Herbert Croly

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Summary Overview

Herbert Croly's book *The Promise of American Life*, published in 1909, is a foundational work of American progressive thought. It advocates for a stronger, more centralized government to promote social justice, economic equality, and national unity. Croly emphasizes the importance of a "national purpose" and argues that government should play an active role in regulating the economy to serve the common good. He also promotes the idea of an integrated society where government, corporations, and citizens work together to achieve progress and social welfare. The book is considered influential in shaping early twentieth-century progressive reforms and ideas about American democracy.

Defining Moment

The early twentieth century in the United States was a period of significant social and economic transformation marked by rapid industrialization and urbanization. As industries grew, millions of people migrated to cities seeking employment, often facing overcrowded living conditions and harsh labor environments. Economic inequality also widened, with a small elite of industrialists and financiers amassing great wealth while many workers endured low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions. This disparity fueled the rise of labor movements and strikes as workers organized to demand better treatment.

Meanwhile, political corruption was widespread, with machine politics influencing elections and government decisions, leading to calls for reforms to improve transparency and accountability. The influx of immigrants added to the cultural diversity, but also posed challenges around integration and discrimination. These complex social and economic issues created a sense of urgency for reform, prompting debates over regulation, social justice, and the role of government—themes that Croly addressed in his call for a more active and unified national approach.

Croly was influenced by the ideas of European social thinkers as well as by contemporary American authors and activists like Theodore Roosevelt, Adolph Berle, and Judge Learned Hand. Noting the limitations

of classical laissez-faire capitalism, he sought to articulate a vision of progressive reform that emphasized an active, centralized government capable of fostering social and economic advancement. His background as a reform-minded thinker and his involvement in the Progressive movement led him to write a work that would serve as a blueprint for national progress and a stronger American democracy.

Author Biography

Herbert Croly was born in 1869 in New York City. Both of his parents were successful journalists. He attended City College in New York for a year before entering Harvard University, which he left before completing his degree. He was deeply engaged in the political and social issues of his time, becoming involved in journalism and reform movements. Croly was a founding editor, in 1914, of the *New Republic*, an influential magazine advocating for liberal and progressive policies. Throughout his life, he promoted ideas of government intervention, social justice, and national unity, becoming a leading voice in the Progressive movement. After publication of *The Promise of American Life*, he was awarded an honorary degree by Harvard. Herbert Croly passed away on May 17, 1930, but his ideas continued to influence American reform politics and liberal thought.



Historical Document

From *The Promise of American Life*

by Herbert Croly (1909)

CHAPTER I

I

WHAT IS THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE?

The average American is nothing if not patriotic. "The Americans are filled," says Mr. Emil Reich in his "Success among the Nations," "with such an implicit and absolute confidence in their Union and in their future success that any remark other than laudatory is unacceptable to the majority of them. We have had many opportunities of hearing public speakers in America cast doubts upon the very existence of God and of Providence, question the historic nature or veracity of the whole fabric of Christianity; but never has it been our fortune to catch the slightest whisper of doubt, the slightest want of faith, in the chief God of America—unlimited belief in the future of America." Mr. Reich's method of emphasis may not be very happy, but the substance of what he says is true. The faith of Americans in their own country is religious, if not in its intensity, at any rate in its almost absolute and universal authority. It pervades the air we breathe. As children we hear it asserted or implied in the conversation of our elders. Every new stage of our educational training provides some additional testimony on its behalf. Newspapers and novelists, orators and playwrights, even if they are little else, are at least loyal preachers of the Truth. The skeptic is not controverted; he is overlooked. It constitutes the kind of faith which is the implication, rather than the object, of thought, and consciously or unconsciously it enters largely into our personal lives as a formative influence. We may distrust and dislike much that is done in the name of our country by our fellow-countrymen; but our country itself, its democratic system, and its prosperous future are above suspicion.

Of course, Americans have no monopoly of patriotic enthusiasm and good faith. Englishmen return thanks to Providence for not being born anything but an Englishman, in churches and ale-houses as well as in comic operas. The Frenchman cherishes and proclaims the idea that France is the most civilized modern country and satisfies best the needs of a man of high social intelligence. The Russian, whose political and social estate does not seem enviable to his foreign contemporaries, secretes a vision of a mystically glorified Russia, which condemns to comparative insipidity the figures of the "Pax

Britannica” and of “La Belle France” enlightening the world. Every nation, in proportion as its nationality is thoroughly alive, must be leavened by the ferment of some such faith. But there are significant differences between the faith of, say, an Englishman in the British Empire and that of an American in the Land of Democracy. The contents of an Englishman’s national idea tends to be more exclusive. His patriotism is anchored to the historical achievements of Great Britain and restricted thereby. As a good patriot he is bound to be more preoccupied with the inherited fabric of national institutions and traditions than he is with the ideal and more than national possibilities of the future. This very loyalty to the national fabric does, indeed, imply an important ideal content; but the national idealism of an Englishman, a German, or even a Frenchman, is heavily mortgaged to his own national history and cannot honestly escape the debt. The good patriot is obliged to offer faithful allegiance to a network of somewhat arbitrary institutions, social forms, and intellectual habits—on the ground that his country is exposed to more serious dangers from premature emancipation than it is from stubborn conservatism. France is the only European country which has sought to make headway towards a better future by means of a revolutionary break with its past; and the results of the French experiment have served for other European countries more as a warning than as an example.

The higher American patriotism, on the other hand, combines loyalty to historical tradition and precedent with the imaginative projection of an ideal national Promise. The Land of Democracy has always appealed to its more enthusiastic children chiefly as a land of wonderful and more than national possibilities. “Neither race nor tradition,” says Professor Hugo Münsterberg in his volume on “The Americans,” “nor the actual past, binds the American to his countrymen, but rather the future which together they are building.” This vision of a better future is not, perhaps, as unclouded for the present generation of Americans as it was for certain former generations; but in spite of a more friendly acquaintance with all sorts of obstacles and pitfalls, our country is still figured in the imagination of its citizens as the Land of Promise. They still believe that somehow and sometime something better will happen to good Americans than has happened to men in any other country; and this belief, vague, innocent, and uninformed though it be, is the expression of an essential constituent in our national ideal. The past should mean less to a European than it does to an American, and the future should mean more. To be sure, American life cannot with impunity be wrenched violently from its moorings any more than the life of a European country can; but our American past, compared to that of any European country, has a character all its own. Its peculiarity consists, not merely in its brevity, but in the fact that from the beginning it has been informed by an idea. From the beginning Americans have been anticipating and projecting a better future. From the beginning the Land of Democracy has been figured as the Land of Promise. Thus the American’s loyalty to the national tradition rather affirms than denies the imaginative projection of a better future. An America which was not the Land of Promise,

which was not informed by a prophetic outlook and a more or less constructive ideal, would not be the America bequeathed to us by our forefathers. In cherishing the Promise of a better national future the American is fulfilling rather than imperiling the substance of the national tradition.

When, however, Americans talk of their country as the Land of Promise, a question may well be raised as to precisely what they mean. They mean, of course, in general, that the future will have something better in store for them individually and collectively than has the past or the present; but a very superficial analysis of this meaning discloses certain ambiguities. What are the particular benefits which this better future will give to Americans either individually or as a nation? And how is this Promise to be fulfilled? Will it fulfill itself, or does it imply certain responsibilities? If so, what responsibilities? When we speak of a young man's career as promising, we mean that his abilities and opportunities are such that he is likely to become rich or famous or powerful; and this judgment does not of course imply, so far as we are concerned, any responsibility. It is merely a prophecy based upon past performances and proved qualities. But the career, which from the standpoint of an outsider is merely an anticipation, becomes for the young man himself a serious task. For him, at all events, the better future will not merely happen. He will have to do something to deserve it. It may be wrecked by unforeseen obstacles, by unsuspected infirmities, or by some critical error of judgment. So it is with the Promise of American life. From the point of view of an immigrant this Promise may consist of the anticipation of a better future, which he can share merely by taking up his residence on American soil; but once he has become an American, the Promise can no longer remain merely an anticipation. It becomes in that case a responsibility, which requires for its fulfillment a certain kind of behavior on the part of himself and his fellow-Americans. And when we attempt to define the Promise of American life, we are obliged, also, to describe the kind of behavior which the fulfillment of the Promise demands.

The distinction between the two aspects of America as a Land of Promise made in the preceding paragraph is sufficiently obvious, but it is usually slurred by the average good American patriot. The better future, which is promised for himself, his children, and for other Americans, is chiefly a matter of confident anticipation. He looks upon it very much as a friendly outsider might look on some promising individual career. The better future is understood by him as something which fulfills itself. He calls his country, not only the Land of Promise, but the Land of Destiny. It is fairly launched on a brilliant and successful career, the continued prosperity of which is prophesied by the very momentum of its advance. As Mr. H.G. Wells says in "The Future in America," "When one talks to an American of his national purpose, he seems a little at a loss; if one speaks of his national destiny, he responds with alacrity." The great majority of Americans would expect a book written about "The Promise of American Life" to contain chiefly a fanciful

description of the glorious American future—a sort of Utopia up-to-date, situated in the land of Good-Enough, and flying the Stars and Stripes. They might admit in words that the achievement of this glorious future implied certain responsibilities, but they would not regard the admission either as startling or novel. Such responsibilities were met by our predecessors; they will be met by our followers. Inasmuch as it is the honorable American past which prophesies on behalf of the better American future, our national responsibility consists fundamentally in remaining true to traditional ways of behavior, standards, and ideals. What we Americans have to do in order to fulfill our national Promise is to keep up the good work—to continue resolutely and cheerfully along the appointed path.

The reader who expects this book to contain a collection of patriotic prophecies will be disappointed. I am not a prophet in any sense of the word, and I entertain an active and intense dislike of the foregoing mixture of optimism, fatalism, and conservatism. To conceive the better American future as a consummation which will take care of itself,—as the necessary result of our customary conditions, institutions, and ideas,—persistence in such a conception is admirably designed to deprive American life of any promise at all. The better future which Americans propose to build is nothing if not an idea which must in certain essential respects emancipate them from their past. American history contains much matter for pride and congratulation, and much matter for regret and humiliation. On the whole, it is a past of which the loyal American has no reason to feel ashamed, chiefly because it has throughout been made better than it was by the vision of a better future; and the American of to-day and to-morrow must remain true to that traditional vision. He must be prepared to sacrifice to that traditional vision even the traditional American ways of realizing it. Such a sacrifice is, I believe, coming to be demanded; and unless it is made, American life will gradually cease to have any specific Promise.

The only fruitful promise of which the life of any individual or any nation can be possessed, is a promise determined by an ideal. Such a promise is to be fulfilled, not by sanguine anticipations, not by a conservative imitation of past achievements, but by laborious, single-minded, clear-sighted, and fearless work. If the promising career of any individual is not determined by a specific and worthy purpose, it rapidly drifts into a mere pursuit of success; and even if such a pursuit is successful, whatever promise it may have had, is buried in the grave of its triumph. So it is with a nation. If its promise is anything more than a vision of power and success, that addition must derive its value from a purpose; because in the moral world the future exists only as a workshop in which a purpose is to be realized. Each of the several leading European nations is possessed of a specific purpose determined for the most part by the pressure of historical circumstances; but the American nation is committed to a purpose which is not merely of historical manufacture. It is committed to the realization of the democratic ideal; and if its Promise is to be fulfilled, it must be prepared to follow whithersoever that ideal may lead.

No doubt Americans have in some measure always conceived their national future as an ideal to be fulfilled. Their anticipations have been uplifting as well as confident and vainglorious. They have been prophesying not merely a safe and triumphant, but also a better, future. The ideal demand for some sort of individual and social amelioration has always accompanied even their vainest flights of patriotic prophecy. They may never have sufficiently realized that this better future, just in so far as it is better, will have to be planned and constructed rather than fulfilled of its own momentum; but at any rate, in seeking to disentangle and emphasize the ideal implications of the American national Promise, I am not wholly false to the accepted American tradition. Even if Americans have neglected these ideal implications, even if they have conceived the better future as containing chiefly a larger portion of familiar benefits, the ideal demand, nevertheless, has always been palpably present; and if it can be established as the dominant aspect of the American tradition, that tradition may be transformed, but it will not be violated.

Furthermore, much as we may dislike the American disposition to take the fulfillment of our national Promise for granted, the fact that such a disposition exists in its present volume and vigor demands respectful consideration. It has its roots in the salient conditions of American life, and in the actual experience of the American people. The national Promise, as it is popularly understood, has in a way been fulfilling itself. If the underlying conditions were to remain much as they have been, the prevalent mixture of optimism, fatalism, and conservatism might retain a formidable measure of justification; and the changes which are taking place in the underlying conditions and in the scope of American national experience afford the most reasonable expectation that this state of mind will undergo a radical alteration. It is new conditions which are forcing Americans to choose between the conception of their national Promise as a process and an ideal. Before, however, the nature of these novel conditions and their significance can be considered, we must examine with more care the relation between the earlier American economic and social conditions and the ideas and institutions associated with them. Only by a better understanding of the popular tradition, only by an analysis of its merits and its difficulties, can we reach a more consistent and edifying conception of the Promise of American life.

II

HOW THE PROMISE HAS BEEN REALIZED

All the conditions of American life have tended to encourage an easy, generous, and irresponsible optimism. As compared to Europeans, Americans have been very much favored by circumstances. Had it not been for the Atlantic Ocean and the virgin wilderness, the United States would never have been the Land of Promise. The European Powers have been obliged from the very conditions of their existence to be more circumspect and less confident of the

future. They are always by way of fighting for their national security and integrity. With possible or actual enemies on their several frontiers, and with their land fully occupied by their own population, they need above all to be strong, to be cautious, to be united, and to be opportune in their policy and behavior. The case of France shows the danger of neglecting the sources of internal strength, while at the same time philandering with ideas and projects of human amelioration. Bismarck and Cavour seized the opportunity of making extremely useful for Germany and Italy the irrelevant and vacillating idealism and the timid absolutism of the third Napoleon. Great Britain has occupied in this respect a better situation than has the Continental Powers. Her insular security made her more independent of the menaces and complications of foreign politics, and left her free to be measurably liberal at home and immeasurably imperial abroad. Yet she has made only a circumspect use of her freedom. British liberalism was forged almost exclusively for the British people, and the British peace for colonial subjects. Great Britain could have afforded better than France to tie its national life to an over-national idea, but the only idea in which Britons have really believed was that of British security, prosperity, and power. In the case of our own country the advantages possessed by England have been amplified and extended. The United States was divided from the mainland of Europe not by a channel but by an ocean. Its dimensions were continental rather than insular. We were for the most part freed from alien interference, and could, so far as we dared, experiment with political and social ideals. The land was unoccupied, and its settlement offered an unprecedented area and abundance of economic opportunity. After the Revolution the whole political and social organization was renewed, and made both more serviceable and more flexible. Under such happy circumstances the New World was assuredly destined to become to its inhabitants a Land of Promise,—a land in which men were offered a fairer chance and a better future than the best which the Old World could afford.

No more explicit expression has ever been given to the way in which the Land of Promise was first conceived by its children than in the “Letters of an American Farmer.” This book was written by a French immigrant, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur before the Revolution, and is informed by an intense consciousness of the difference between conditions in the Old and in the New World. “What, then, is an American, this new man?” asks the Pennsylvanian farmer. “He is either a European or the descendant of a European; hence the strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country...

“He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and prosperity will one day cause great changes in the world. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor; this labor is founded on the basis of self-interest; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded a morsel of bread, now fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields,

whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed them all; without any part being claimed either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord.... The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American."

Although the foregoing is one of the first, it is also one of the most explicit descriptions of the fundamental American; and it deserves to be analyzed with some care. According to this French convert the American is a man, or the descendant of a man, who has emigrated from Europe chiefly because he expects to be better able in the New World to enjoy the fruits of his own labor. The conception implies, consequently, an Old World, in which the ordinary man cannot become independent and prosperous, and, on the other hand, a New World in which economic opportunities are much more abundant and accessible. America has been peopled by Europeans primarily because they expected in that country to make more money more easily. To the European immigrant—that is, to the aliens who have been converted into Americans by the advantages of American life—the Promise of America has consisted largely in the opportunity which it offered of economic independence and prosperity. Whatever else the better future, of which Europeans anticipate the enjoyment in America, may contain, these converts will consider themselves cheated unless they are in a measure relieved of the curse of poverty.

This conception of American life and its Promise is as much alive to-day as it was in 1780. Its expression has no doubt been modified during four generations of democratic political independence, but the modification has consisted of an expansion and a development rather than of a transposition. The native American, like the alien immigrant, conceives the better future which awaits himself and other men in America as fundamentally a future in which economic prosperity will be still more abundant and still more accessible than it has yet been either here or abroad. No alteration or attenuation of this demand has been permitted. With all their professions of Christianity their national idea remains thoroughly worldly. They do not want either for themselves or for their descendants an indefinite future of poverty and deprivation in this world, redeemed by beatitude in the next. The Promise, which bulks so large in their patriotic outlook, is a promise of comfort and prosperity for an ever increasing majority of good Americans. At a later stage of their social development they may come to believe that they have ordered a larger supply of prosperity than the economic factory is capable of producing. Those who are already rich and comfortable, and who are keenly alive to the difficulty of distributing these benefits over a larger social area, may come to tolerate the idea that poverty and want are an essential part of the social order. But as yet this traditional European opinion has found few echoes in America, even among the comfortable and the rich. The general belief still is that Americans are not destined to renounce, but to enjoy.

Let it be immediately added, however, that this economic independence and prosperity has always been absolutely associated in the American mind with free political institutions. The “American Farmer” traced the good fortune of the European immigrant in America, not merely to the abundance of economic opportunity, but to the fact that a ruling class of abbots and lords had no prior claim to a large share of the products of the soil. He did not attach the name of democracy to the improved political and social institutions of America, and when the political differences between Great Britain and her American colonies culminated in the Revolutionary War, the converted “American Farmer” was filled with anguish at this violent assertion of the “New Americanism.” Nevertheless he was fully alive to the benefits which the immigrant enjoyed from a larger dose of political and social freedom; and so, of course, have been all the more intelligent of the European converts to Americanism. A certain number of them, particularly during the early years, came over less for the purpose of making money than for that of escaping from European political and religious persecution. America has always been conventionally conceived, not merely as a land of abundant and accessible economic opportunities, but also as a refuge for the oppressed; and the immigrant ships are crowded both during times of European famine and during times of political revolution and persecution.

Inevitably, however, this aspect of the American Promise has undergone certain important changes since the establishment of our national independence. When the colonists succeeded in emancipating themselves from political allegiance to Great Britain, they were confronted by the task of organizing a stable and efficient government without encroaching on the freedom, which was even at that time traditionally associated with American life. The task was by no means an easy one, and required for its performance the application of other political principles than that of freedom. The men who were responsible for this great work were not, perhaps, entirely candid in recognizing the profound modifications in their traditional ideas which their constructive political work had implied; but they were at all events fully aware of the great importance of their addition to the American idea. That idea, while not ceasing to be at bottom economic, became more than ever political and social in its meaning and contents. The Land of Freedom became in the course of time also the Land of Equality. The special American political system, the construction of which was predicted in the “Farmer’s” assertion of the necessary novelty of American modes of thought and action, was made explicitly, if not uncompromisingly, democratic; and the success of this democratic political system was indissolubly associated in the American mind with the persistence of abundant and widely distributed economic prosperity. Our democratic institutions became in a sense the guarantee that prosperity would continue to be abundant and accessible. In case the majority of good Americans were not prosperous, there would be grave reasons for suspecting that our institutions were not doing their duty.

The more consciously democratic Americans became, however, the less they were satisfied with a conception of the Promised Land, which went no farther than a pervasive economic prosperity guaranteed by free institutions. The amelioration promised to aliens and to future Americans was to possess its moral and social aspects. The implication was, and still is, that by virtue of the more comfortable and less trammelled lives which Americans were enabled to lead, they would constitute a better society and would become in general a worthier set of men. The confidence which American institutions placed in the American citizen was considered equivalent to a greater faith in the excellence of human nature. In our favored land political liberty and economic opportunity were by a process of natural education inevitably making for individual and social amelioration. In Europe the people did not have a fair chance. Population increased more quickly than economic opportunities, and the opportunities which did exist were largely monopolized by privileged classes. Power was lodged in the hands of a few men, whose interest depended upon keeping the people in a condition of economic and political servitude; and in this way a divorce was created between individual interest and social stability and welfare. The interests of the privileged rulers demanded the perpetuation of unjust institutions. The interest of the people demanded a revolutionary upheaval. In the absence of such a revolution they had no sufficient inducement to seek their own material and moral improvement. The theory was proclaimed and accepted as a justification for this system of popular oppression that men were not to be trusted to take care of themselves—that they could be kept socially useful only by the severest measures of moral, religious, and political discipline. The theory of the American democracy and its practice was proclaimed to be the antithesis of this European theory and practice. The people were to be trusted rather than suspected and disciplined. They must be tied to their country by the strong bond of self-interest. Give them a fair chance, and the natural goodness of human nature would do the rest. Individual and public interest will, on the whole, coincide, provided no individuals are allowed to have special privileges. Thus the American system will be predestined to success by its own adequacy, and its success will constitute an enormous stride towards human amelioration. Just because our system is at bottom a thorough test of the ability of human nature to respond admirably to a fair chance, the issue of the experiment is bound to be of more than national importance. The American system stands for the highest hope of an excellent worldly life that mankind has yet ventured,—the hope that men can be improved without being fettered, that they can be saved without even vicariously being nailed to the cross.

Such are the claims advanced on behalf of the American system; and within certain limits this system has made good. Americans have been more than usually prosperous. They have been more than usually free. They have, on the whole, made their freedom and prosperity contribute to a higher level of individual and social excellence. Most assuredly the average Americanized American is neither a more intelligent, a wiser, nor a better man than the average

European; but he is likely to be a more energetic and hopeful one. Out of a million well-established Americans, taken indiscriminately from all occupations and conditions, compared to a corresponding assortment of Europeans, a larger proportion of the former will be leading alert, active, and useful lives. Within a given social area there will be a smaller amount of social wreckage and a larger amount of wholesome and profitable achievement. The mass of the American people is, on the whole, more deeply stirred, more thoroughly awake, more assertive in their personal demands, and more confident of satisfying them. In a word, they are more alive, and they must be credited with the moral and social benefit attaching to a larger amount of vitality.

Furthermore, this greater individual vitality, although intimately connected with the superior agricultural and industrial opportunities of a new country, has not been due exclusively to such advantages. Undoubtedly the vast areas of cheap and fertile land which have been continuously available for settlement have contributed, not only to the abundance of American prosperity, but also to the formation of American character and institutions; and undoubtedly many of the economic and political evils which are now becoming offensively obtrusive are directly or indirectly derived from the gradual monopolization of certain important economic opportunities. Nevertheless, these opportunities could never have been converted so quickly into substantial benefits had it not been for our more democratic political and social forms. A privileged class does not secure itself in the enjoyment of its advantages merely by legal intrenchments. It depends quite as much upon disqualifying the "lower classes" from utilizing their opportunities by a species of social inhibition. The rail-splitter can be so easily encouraged to believe that rail-splitting is his vocation. The tragedy in the life of Mr. J.M. Barrie's "Admirable Crichton" was not due to any legal prohibition of his conversion in England, as on the tropic island, into a veritable chief, but that on English soil he did not in his own soul want any such elevation and distinction. His very loyalty to the forms and fabric of English life kept him fatuously content with the mean truckling and meaner domineering of his position of butler. On the other hand, the loyalty of an American to the American idea would tend to make him aggressive and self-confident. Our democratic prohibition of any but occasional social distinctions and our democratic dislike to any suggestion of authentic social inferiority have contributed as essentially to the fluid and elastic substance of American life as have its abundant and accessible economic opportunities.

The increased momentum of American life, both in its particles and its mass, unquestionably has a considerable moral and social value. It is the beginning, the only possible beginning, of a better life for the people as individuals and for society. So long as the great majority of the poor in any country are inert and are laboring without any hope of substantial rewards in this world, the whole associated life of that community rests on an equivocal foundation. Its moral and social order is tied to an economic system which starves and

mutilates the great majority of the population, and under such conditions its religion necessarily becomes a spiritual drug, administered for the purpose of subduing the popular discontent and relieving the popular misery. The only way the associated life of such a community can be radically improved is by the leavening of the inert popular mass. Their wants must be satisfied, and must be sharpened and increased with the habit of satisfaction. During the past hundred years every European state has made a great stride in the direction of arousing its poorer citizens to be more wholesomely active, discontented, and expectant; but our own country has succeeded in traveling farther in this direction than has any other, and it may well be proud of its achievement. That the American political and economic system has accomplished so much on behalf of the ordinary man does constitute the fairest hope that men have been justified in entertaining of a better worldly order; and any higher social achievement, which America may hereafter reach, must depend upon an improved perpetuation of this process. The mass of mankind must be aroused to still greater activity by a still more abundant satisfaction of their needs, and by a consequent increase of their aggressive discontent.

The most discriminating appreciation, which I have ever read, of the social value of American national achievement has been written by Mr. John B. Crozier; and the importance of the matter is such that it will be well to quote it at length. Says Mr. Crozier in his chapter on "Reconstruction in America," in the third volume of his "History of Intellectual Development": "There [in America] a natural equality of sentiment, springing out of and resting on a broad equality of material and social conditions, has been the heritage of the people from the earliest times.... This broad natural equality of sentiment, rooted in equal material opportunities, equal education, equal laws, equal opportunities, and equal access to all positions of honor and trust, has just sufficient inequality mixed with it—in the shape of greater or less mental endowments, higher or lower degrees of culture, larger or smaller material possessions, and so on—to keep it sweet and human; while at the same time it is all so gently graded, and marked by transitions so easy and natural, that no gap was anywhere to be discovered on which to found an order of privilege or caste. Now an equality like this, with the erectness, independence, energy, and initiative it brings with it, in men, sprung from the loins of an imperial race is a possession, not for a nation only, but for civilization itself and for humanity. It is the distinct raising of the entire body of a people to a higher level, and so brings civilization a stage nearer its goal. It is the first successful attempt in recorded history to get a healthy, natural equality which should reach down to the foundations of the state and to the great masses of men; and in its results corresponds to what in other lands (excepting, perhaps, in luxury alone) has been attained only by the few,—the successful and the ruling spirits. To lose it, therefore, to barter it or give it away, would be in the language of Othello 'such deep damnation that nothing else could match,' and would be an irreparable loss to the world and to civilization."

Surely no nation can ask for a higher and more generous tribute than that which Mr. Crozier renders to America in the foregoing quotation, and its value is increased by the source from which it comes. It is written by a man who, as a Canadian, has had the opportunity of knowing American life well without being biased in its favor, and who, as the historian of the intellectual development of our race, has made an exhaustive study of the civilizations both of the ancient and the modern worlds. Nothing can be soberly added to it on behalf of American national achievement, but neither should it be diminished by any important idea and phrase. The American economic, political, and social organization has given to its citizens the benefits of material prosperity, political liberty, and a wholesome natural equality; and this achievement is a gain, not only to Americans, but to the world and to civilization. [...]



Glossary

aliens: in this context: unnaturalized foreign residents; noncitizens

insipidity: extreme dullness; lacking in spirit or zest

Providence: God's foreseeing and care for his creation (and the creatures that inhabit it)

Document Analysis

The text is the first chapter of Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life*. The author discusses the prevalent patriotic sentiment in America, noting the implicit faith Americans have in their country's future. He contrasts this with European patriotism, which is more tied to historical achievements. Croly posits that the American national idea is rooted in the future and the promise of a better life. He explores the meaning of this "promise," which encompasses individual and collective improvement and assigns responsibility for fulfilling it. The author argues that America's promise is deeply rooted in providing economic prosperity and equality through its free institutions and he criticizes the notion of taking the fulfillment of America's national promise for granted. Croly underscores that this progress must be maintained by the mass of mankind to ensure a better world order.

The chapter begins by establishing the pervasive sense of patriotism that characterizes the average American. Croly quotes Emil Reich who notes that Americans possess an almost unwavering belief in their Union and its future success. Croly elaborates on this idea, suggesting that Americans hold a quasi-religious faith in their country. This sentiment permeates daily life, from childhood education to the media, fostering a collective optimism about the nation's future. He emphasizes that even when criticizing aspects of American society, the fundamental faith in the nation's democratic system and prosperous future remains untouched.

Croly then draws a distinction between American patriotism and its European counterparts, arguing that European patriotism is often anchored in historical achievements and a sense of national exclusiveness. He points out that an Englishman's national identity is deeply rooted in the historical accomplishments of Great Britain, limiting their focus on the future. In contrast, American patriotism combines a respect for historical tradition with a forward-looking, imaginative projection of an ideal national promise. The United States is viewed as a land of possibilities and a place where citizens are actively building a better future. This vision is rooted in the idea that something better will happen to Americans compared to people elsewhere.

Croly delves deeper into the concept of the "promise" of American life, questioning its specific meaning. He suggests that while Americans generally believe in a better future, the specifics of this future and the responsibilities involved are often ambiguous. He cautions against a superficial understanding of the promise, where it is seen as something that will automatically fulfill itself. Croly suggests that the promise is not merely an anticipation of a better life, but a responsibility that requires specific actions and behaviors from Americans. He also warns against a blend of optimism, fatalism, and conservatism, which he believes deprives American life of its true potential.

Croly emphasizes that the fulfillment of the American promise requires a conscious effort to emancipate from the past and strive towards a vision of a better future. He states that while American history contains elements of pride and regret, the defining characteristic of American society is the constant pursuit of improvement. This requires a willingness to sacrifice traditional American ways to achieve the greater vision. He suggests that this transformation is necessary to ensure the American life continues to hold its unique promise.

Croly further discusses the historical and social factors that have contributed to the realization of the American promise. He highlights the favorable circumstances of the United States, including its geographic isolation and abundant natural resources. Compared to Europe, where nations are constantly vying for security, the United States enjoyed a greater degree of freedom to experiment with political and social ideals. The vast and unoccupied land offered unparalleled economic opportunities, which combined with the renewed political and social organization after the American Revolution made America a "Land of Promise."

Croly then analyzes the way in which the Land of Promise was first conceived by its children, mainly immigrants who saw America as a haven for economic opportunity and independence. He cites *Letters from an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, which describes the American as a new man, acting upon new principles, and able to enjoy the fruits of his own labor. This concept of the American promise as an opportunity for economic

prosperity and political freedom remains alive today, says Croly. Americans believe they are destined to enjoy the world's prosperity and political freedom.

Croly concludes by exploring the association of free political institutions with the economic prosperity in the minds of Americans. The theory has been proclaimed and accepted that men are to be trusted rather than suspected and disciplined. He acknowledges that the American system has made progress towards creating a more just and equitable society. However, he emphasizes that there is still much work to be done to fulfill the promise of American life.

—Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD

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