

THE
NEW
REPUBLIC
READER



*Eighty Years of
Opinion & Debate*

Edited by

DOROTHY WICKENDEN

The New Republic Reader



EIGHTY YEARS OF OPINION
AND DEBATE

Edited by
DOROTHY WICKENDEN



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*The
New Republic
Reader*



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INTRODUCTION

Little Insurrections

Twentieth-century liberalism has won. It has inspired democratic revolutions from the Soviet Union to South Africa, and has yet again disabused this country of its prolonged infatuation with conservatism. Yet even now no one is quite sure precisely what liberalism is. Known more for its fractiousness than for its coherence, more for its mutability than for its doctrinal consistency, liberalism is best defined as a state of mind: an attitude toward the possibilities of politics and culture that is both defiantly hopeful and deeply skeptical. As Walter Lippmann wrote in 1919:

The word, liberalism, was introduced into the jargon of American politics by that group who were Progressives in 1912 and Wilson Democrats from 1916 to 1918. They wished to distinguish their own general aspirations in politics from those of the chronic partisans and the social revolutionists. They had no other bond of unity. They were not a political movement. There was no established body of doctrine. . . . If [American liberalism] has any virtue at all it is that many who call themselves liberals are aware that the temper of tolerant inquiry must be maintained.

Eighty years ago Lippmann helped launch *The New Republic*, a self-proclaimed “journal of opinion” that has defined the liberal project in America. The magazine was conceived to perpetuate the free exchange of ideas in the hope of creating a more civil society. In large part it succeeded, quickly becoming the country’s preeminent journal of politics and the arts, respected and reviled, and almost always given a hearing. Herbert Croly, its founder, wrote that his object “was less to inform or entertain its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions.” This anthology is a record of the magazine’s long attempt to incite those insurrections, which are the grounds for all social progress.

In 1909, five years before the birth of *The New Republic*, Herbert Croly, an intensely shy, cerebral architecture critic, published *The Promise of American Life*. His turgid polemic argued that if Americans conscientiously dedicated themselves to the pursuit of freedom and social justice, they could recapture the lofty principles upon which the nation had been built. “The only fruitful promise of which the life of any individual or any nation can be possessed,” Croly wrote, “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.” Croly, then forty years old, had retained his early admiration for Auguste Comte’s Positivist faith in science and humanity. But at Harvard he had also absorbed the pragmatic teachings of William James and George Santayana, and he feared that the country’s special dispensation was endangered by industrial capitalism, which had created vast disparities between the ruling elite and the mass of exploited workers.

Croly cast aside the tradition of nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism favored by most Progressives, with its Jeffersonian emphasis on free competition and natural rights. He replaced it with a vision he described as a “new nationalism,” which combined Hamilton’s conservative belief in a strong federal government with an argument that the government had to be employed as a progressive social force. Given a forward-looking president and a public-spirited electorate, Croly declared, America not only could reform itself, but also could once again serve as a beacon to peoples around the world who cherished the idea of democracy.

The book made an impression. Its high-minded patriotism was admired by Theodore Roosevelt, who called for a “new nationalism” in his 1912 presidential campaign. It also appealed to Willard Straight, a banker at J. P. Morgan and an imperialistic diplomat who had served in China; and to his idealistic wife, Dorothy, a Whitney and an heir to the Standard Oil fortune. Dorothy urged Croly to start up an independent weekly magazine, and told him that she and her husband would finance it. The Straights bought two brownstones on West Twenty-first Street in New York City’s Chelsea district. The editors had spartan offices, but to compensate, they had a wine cellar, a library, a paneled dining room, and a French chef. Croly hired as co-editors two ex-socialists, each of whom had published his own book about American politics: Walter Lippmann (only four years out of Harvard) and Walter Weyl (an economist who had studied at Wharton). Together they began to sketch the contours of their “new republic,” a title they reluctantly settled upon only after discarding *One Nation*, *New Nation*, *The Republic*, and *FACTS*, which was Straight’s own bankerly inspiration.

The times were right for the undertaking. In 1914 the Progressive movement was languishing, World War I had just erupted, and the concentration of capital and industrial power, which had begun with the North’s effort to

finance the Civil War, was now manifest in an unscrupulous class of businessmen, bankers, and political bosses. It appeared to be just the moment for a moralistic yet reform-minded movement that proposed, as Croly put it, to “do something to keep faith alive in those members of the community who believe in the power of truth to set men free.” The editors saw their magazine primarily as a means to achieve sweeping domestic reform in areas such as women’s rights, the labor movement, the electoral system, and social welfare. *The New Republic*, choosing as its symbol a ship navigating rough waters, blithely set forth.

From the start, the magazine was unashamedly elitist and calculatedly impudent. “The whole point,” Croly said, “is that we are trying to impose views on blind or reluctant people.” At the very least, he thought, “we’ll throw a few firecrackers under the skirts of the old women on the bench and in other high places.” Among those they startled were their own pacifist friends. In the first issue, dated November 7, 1914, the editors—then as now primarily young men from Harvard unhindered by self-doubt—pronounced “The End of American Isolationism.” They understood that the “relations between our democratic national ideal and our international obligations” had changed irrevocably—though they were not yet entirely sure just what that meant. By February 1917 they had made up their minds, and boldly came out for interventionism. Lippmann wrote an editorial in which he described German aggression against Britain and France as a war against “the Atlantic community” and “the civilization of which we are a part.” In another, he declared, “We are becoming [their] open ally . . . because at the beginning of the war we decided that they were fighting in the main for the kind of world in which we wished to live.”

Only three years after its founding, *The New Republic* was shaping the direction of a new liberalism that, the editors believed, realistically addressed America’s emerging status and responsibilities as a world power. But not all liberals shared the magazine’s confidence that its benign form of nationalism would prevail, and that the Allies could be persuaded to agree to a just peace. Randolph Bourne, the radical social critic and a *New Republic* staff contributor, attacked the editors for their presumptions—an act that made him a hero, John Patrick Diggins notes in *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, not only to the Greenwich Village intellectuals of his generation but to the New Left of the 1960s as well. Bourne angrily demanded of “the war intellectuals,” as he referred to his colleagues: “If the war is too strong for you to prevent, how is it going to be weak enough for you to mold to your liberal purposes?”

Bourne’s skepticism was later confirmed at Versailles, in an episode that deeply embarrassed the *New Republic* editors. For years Croly, Weyl, and Lippmann had frequented Teddy Roosevelt’s Oyster Bay home and enthusiastically endorsed his politics. But by 1916, at the urging of Lippmann, they

had come around to Woodrow Wilson, who had fashioned a more enlightened domestic policy in a bid for liberal support and was heeding the editors' counsel on foreign affairs. Before long Lippmann, a shameless toady, was informally advising the president, dining at the White House, and—along with Croly—paying weekly visits to the New York apartment of Wilson's chief political adviser, Colonel Edward House. In April 1917, when Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war, Lippmann wrote to Colonel House that it was a "magnificent" address: "We are delighted with it here, down to the last comma." Some months later Lippmann took a leave of absence from the magazine, first to work for the secretary of war, and then to help the president in the secret drafting of the Fourteen Points. As Ronald Steel points out in *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, the magazine became known in this period, with some accuracy, as a house organ for Wilson. Readers thought it provided an inside glimpse of administration policy, as did stock market speculators, who bribed newsstand operators for advance copies.

However, this proximity to power was problematic for a journal that prided itself on its role as omniscient critic. The closer *The New Republic* came to directly influencing presidential policy, the more it compromised its integrity and institutional intelligence. In the end, Lippmann was appalled at Wilson's unsatisfactory completion of his handiwork, accurately predicting that the punitive peace imposed at Versailles would "balkanize" Central Europe and unleash the destructive forces of nationalism. The magazine turned against the president, and against the idea of the League of Nations, now doomed to inefficacy—a decision, notes Diggins in his seventieth-anniversary essay for *The New Republic*, that caused thousands of readers to decamp to the competing weekly, the pacifist *Nation*. *The New Republic's* dalliance with Wilson had taught the editors a Jamesian lesson: in the "great game" of international diplomacy, the pursuit of goodness is not necessarily rewarded. Liberals would carry this lesson forward through World War II, Vietnam, Central America, and numerous smaller entanglements, leading to a foreign policy that was deeply ambivalent about the proper uses of American power.

World War I was only the first shock to Croly's new nationalism, with its assumption that the world, if given a chance, would emulate the spirit and substance of American freedom. The other was provided by the Russian Revolution, which almost from the start simultaneously inspired and depressed the magazine's editors and the liberal mind in general. Although radicals like John Reed and muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens greeted it with ardent approval, the liberals at the magazine were less sure. "The Russian Revolution is magnificent, but it is portentous," the editors wrote amid the upheavals of 1917, and for the next two decades they desperately attempted to make sense of the perils and promise of communism, both in Russia and

in China. "I sympathize with those who seek for something good in Soviet Russia. But when we come to the actual thing, what is one to say?" John Maynard Keynes wondered in 1925. "I am not ready for a creed which does not care how much it destroys the liberty and security of daily life, which uses deliberately the weapons of persecution, destruction, and international strife."

Similar fears beset Croly, but there was no denying the rough energy of the Bolshevik Revolution, or the power of Lenin's mesmerizing rhetoric about a "classless society." Capitalism, with its "call of marketplace idolatry," as Harold Laski, the English socialist and *New Republic* regular, put it, had no such intellectual allure, and appeared to be even more stubbornly resistant to change than Croly had anticipated. In a special 1922 supplement in which Croly retooled "The New Republic Idea," he warned that the Great War had imperiled the very foundations of the Western world. The danger arose

from a science which multiplies machinery much more than it illuminates human nature, from an industry which saves so much human labor and wastes so much human life, from a technology which, while prodigiously productive, is still too sterile to cultivate craftsmanship and creative work, from a nationalism which is opposed to imperialism but which insists itself on being pettily imperialistic, from a liberty which, in spite of so many proofs of its constructive possibilities, remains consciously negative and unifying. . . . [The American people] feel themselves chained to an economic machine which is grinding their lives smaller, which they cannot control, and which their masters either cannot or will not control. . . . The new gods are headstrong. Their impulses are at once so irresistible and so anarchic that modern society seems incapable of recovering its self-esteem.

Whether or not America felt this way, it was clear that Croly did. Until his death in 1930, he continued to hope that Soviet communism would give way to democracy, and that American capitalism could be redeemed. But he increasingly found solace from the discordant realities of the modern world in a watery form of Christian worship that was expressed in articles for the magazine with titles such as "Christianity as a Way of Life." He even joined the mystical Orage Cult, along with Katherine Mansfield and Hart Crane, whose members, writes David Levy in a biography of Croly, attempted to "liberate the individual by awakening higher consciousness" through diet, breathing exercises, and gymnastics.

By 1920 all the founding editors, in one way or another, had renounced the confident liberalism that had brought them together six years before. While Croly found religion and communed with his consciousness, Walter Weyl turned back to his socialist roots, abandoning *The New Republic*,

which he viewed as increasingly conservative, for *The Nation*. “Gone was Weyl’s hope,” Charles Forcey writes in *The Crossroads of Liberalism*, “that America’s ‘social surplus’ would bring progress without a class struggle. The success of the Soviets completed the disintegration.” Meanwhile, Lippmann—with his now undisguised patrician distrust of the mass public—turned right, going to *The New York World* to be a columnist and editor. Before he left the magazine in 1920, Lippmann had refused to print Weyl’s essay “Tired Radicals,” a barely disguised personal attack on him. The essay, later published posthumously in a collection of Weyl’s essays, ridiculed “immature men, grown to clever reactionaries,” who, “after shedding all ideas become absorbed in business, practical politics, or pleasure, retaining only an ironical, half regrettable pity for their callow days of radicalism.” This early split—rancorous and deeply felt—anticipated the emergence of neoconservatism as an alternative philosophy for disaffected left intellectuals. Then, as later in the century, disagreements over America’s role as a world power, and over the best approach to purging the evils of communism and the corruptions of capitalism, appeared to be insurmountable.

Bruce Bliven, who had been the managing editor since 1923, took over as editor upon Croly’s death in 1930. More a working journalist than a political philosopher, Bliven took the magazine closer to the tumult of real politics, and for the first time *The New Republic* became unreservedly left-wing. Demoralized by the miscarriage of justice in the 1927 Sacco and Vanzetti trial—which became a nearly obsessive preoccupation for the magazine, as for an entire generation of liberals—Bliven was increasingly pessimistic about America’s political order. After visiting the prisoners before their execution in 1927, he wrote, “these two were the haphazard victims of a blind hostility in the community, which was compounded of ‘patriotic’ fervor, anti-foreignism, and of hatred of these men in particular because, as Professor Felix Frankfurter has summed it up, they denied the three things judge and jury held most dear: God, country, and property.” The case focused attention on the raw inequities and class prejudices of American life, and helped to account for the magazine’s growing doubts about the prospects for true social reform.

The New Deal, which in many ways fulfilled the progressive dreams of the early editors, was initially dismissed by the second generation for not being radical enough. (A now crotchety Lippmann, in his 1937 book, *The Good Society*, attacked FDR from the right for attempting to create a “planned new social order”—precisely what he had called for two decades earlier.) The editors agreed about the failures of industrial capitalism. They simply couldn’t come to terms about solutions. George Soule, the magazine’s chief advocate for economic planning, was admired by Roosevelt’s New Deal administration, which offered him several jobs that he turned down. But as

David Seidman points out in *The New Republic: A Voice of Modern Liberalism*, Soule was regarded with undisguised irritation at the magazine. Felix Frankfurter, a close friend of the founding editors and an adviser to *The New Republic* since its inception, tartly wrote to Bliven of Soule's numbing essays, "I have insisted ad nauseam on more concreteness in NR, instead of repetition of general talk about a planned society." John Dos Passos suggested to Edmund Wilson that *The New Republic* print THIS IS ALL BULLSHIT at the bottom of each page.

Meanwhile, Malcolm Cowley and Edmund Wilson, who took turns as literary editor during the thirties, were calling, if only vaguely, for revolution. Cowley, the preeminent spokesman of the "lost generation," had fled to Europe in the twenties, to find respite from the vapidness of American culture. He and many of his fellow exiles returned with guilty consciences, as Diggins observes, and the Great Depression gave them a new sense of mission. "To the writers and artists of my generation," Edmund Wilson wrote, "who had grown up in the Big Business era and had always resented its barbarism, its crowding-out of everything they cared about, these years were not depressing but stimulating. One couldn't help being exhilarated at the sudden unexpected collapse of that stupid gigantic fraud." Cowley and Wilson were a little scornful of their magazine, with its genteel traditions and old-fashioned decorum. Wilson described it as "a chilly and unfriendly home for anybody but a respectable liberal of at least middle age."

Bliven, Cowley, and Wilson were more ready to forgive the failings of Soviet Russia than those of democratic America. Although Bliven published articles by skeptics such as John Dewey, Max Lerner, Charles Beard, and Vincent Sheean, who warned that Russia was no less dangerous than Germany, he rejected their dour prognostications, accompanying Sheean's critique, "Brumaire: The Soviet Union as a Fascist State" with a dissent called "Common Sense About Russia," in which he attempted to rationalize the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. The previous year he had gone so far as to write an open letter to Stalin, in which he expressed dismay about the purges and show trials, but went on to propose respectfully, among other things, that Stalin consider "withdrawing from the public life" for a time.

The magazine became a proponent of the Popular Front, whose ostensible purpose was the fight against fascism in Europe and reactionary forces in America. In fact, it was an elaborate international deception set up by the Communist Party as a way of recruiting liberals and socialists. Rationalizing this unseemly alliance in 1936, the editors wrote: "It is better to win with the aid of people, some of whom we don't like, than to lose and come under the iron-fisted control of people all of whom we dislike a great deal more." In a famous 1931 essay, "An Appeal to Progressives," Wilson renounced Croly's

faith in domestic reform, and advised American radicals and progressives to “take Communism away from the Communists.” The American opposition, he rashly declared, “must not be afraid to dynamite the old shibboleths and conceptions and substitute new ones as shocking as possible.”

In 1932 Wilson went after Lippmann, Soule, Beard, and Stuart Chase for tinkering around the edges of capitalism with their schemes for liberal planned economies. Even if FDR was elected, Wilson wrote, “it would be the capitalists, not the liberals who would do the planning; and they would plan to save their own skins at the expense of whoever had to bleed.” Stuart Chase, a longtime contributor to *The New Republic* (and whose July 1932 series on “A New Deal for America” may have influenced FDR’s embrace of the slogan), retorted that Mr. Wilson “has recently been converted to one of the forms of communism, and safe in the arms of Marx can take pot shots at those outside the compound. . . . Well, I’ll tell you, Mr. Edmund Wilson. While you were dissecting Proust and other literary gentlemen—and a very pretty job you did—I was dissecting the industrial structure.” Wilson conceded his folly in 1937, in “Complaints of the Literary Left,” in which he noted the increasing terrorism of Stalin, and in his 1938 book, *To the Finland Station*, excerpted in *The New Republic*. Wilson’s apostasy led to a feud with his friend Cowley, who did not fully relinquish his own faith in Soviet communism until after the Hitler-Stalin Pact. This finally brought to an end, at least at the magazine, what W. H. Auden described as “the clever hopes” of “a low dishonest decade.”

The New Republic’s saving graces in the thirties were its cultural criticism and its social reporting. Cowley’s and Wilson’s myopia about Soviet communism did not extend to the arts, where they exuberantly explored modernism and its relation to the cultural legacy of the West. In the late twenties and early thirties, Wilson wrote brilliantly about Poe and Hemingway, Dostoyevsky and Joyce, Yeats, and T. S. Eliot. Cowley wrote with equal suppleness about Dada, *Gone with the Wind*, and André Malraux; *Exile’s Return*, Cowley’s literary memoir, was excerpted in the magazine in 1931. The magazine published William Faulkner, Granville Hicks, the jazz critic Otis Ferguson, Thomas Mann, and Ignazio Silone, among others, and Cowley initiated “Books That Changed Our Minds,” an ambitious twelve-part series investigating the intellectual underpinnings of Western thought. “Unlike the Marxist literary left,” Diggins writes in his seventieth-anniversary essay, “Cowley and Wilson . . . rejected the ‘Progressive’ school of American history, in which students were taught to absorb Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman and to steer clear of Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James, those ‘dark’ romantics and realists who cast doubt on progress and reason.” The editors’ disgust with capitalism even roused them from their editorial armchairs. Cowley, Wilson, and Bliven all ventured out into working-class America, producing riveting accounts of the miseries of class