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# The Idea of Change in American Politics: Meaningful Concept or Empty Promise?

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When confronted with the suddenly omnipresent theme of "change" in present-day American politics, skeptics will likely scoff and say, "Change? So what else is new?" And well they might, for in fact nothing is more familiar and (dare one say) more *unchanging* than the high status accorded to change in American life.

Still, we are seeing it illustrated with particular vividness in the 2008 presidential campaign. Both of the leading candidates vie for the title of "change agent in chief." These appeals to change are so vast and all-encompassing that the idea of change seems to have transcended the petty requirement of enumerating specific attributes and has come instead to represent change as a vast metaphysical and moral principle.

But recent politicians have not invented this reflexive dependence on the concept of change. It is everywhere. There are always examples close to hand. For example, on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, we were informed by a prominent news organization that 9/11 was "The Day America Changed." It is true that on 9/11 something momentous and terrible happened, but this slogan implied that something fundamental about America had been altered forever. That claim seems excessive, for several reasons.

In the first place, as many of us pointed out at the time, while the horrors visited upon the United States by these attacks were a shock, they also were brutal reminders of the true nature of the human condition, indications that no nation or people can long sustain a vacation from history.[1] As C. S. Lewis observed in a magnificent 1939 address entitled "Learning in War-Time," which was cited by many observers in the wake of 9/11, the "true perspective" on the calamity of war is that it "creates no absolutely new situation," but instead "aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it," reminding us that "human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice."[2] The change was in fact no change at all.

This slogan was also ironic in a less lofty sense. Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York used the occasion to harangue his audience about the bickering that had characterized the long, bitter, and still inconclusive debates over what was to be done with the Ground Zero site where the Twin Towers had formerly stood.

It was a moment that had symbolic resonance far beyond the precincts of lower Manhattan. Although there was a brief moment when the nation seemed powerfully united in response to the attacks, that spirit faded very quickly, and the political environment reverted to the sustained partisan acrimony that had taken hold of the nation's politics during the mid-1990s and continued through the government shutdown, the

[1] Wilfred M. McClay, "The Continuing Irony of American History," *First Things*, No. 120 (February 2002), pp. 20–25.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1979), p. 49.

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Clinton impeachment, and the fiercely disputed election of 2000. Whatever the change represented by 9/11 may be, it seems yet to have been fully assimilated. We reverted to the former political antagonisms with astonishing and disturbing rapidity.

**DEMOCRACY AND CHANGE**

So "change" is not always what it seems to be in modern American public life. Not surprisingly, that insight is itself nothing new. It was described over a century and a half ago by Alexis de Tocqueville in a little-known chapter of his *Democracy in America*, a chapter bearing this loaded title: "How the Aspect of Society in the United States is at Once Excited and Monotonous."[3] As Tocqueville saw it, "the aspect of American society is animated because men and things are always changing, but it is monotonous because all these changes are alike." Tocqueville attributed this paradoxical state to the fact that Americans' passions tended uniformly to revolve around the accumulation of wealth, so that while the pursuit was endless, the goals were unchanging.

There is a great deal to be said for this observation, but it is not the whole truth of the matter. For one thing, it exaggerates the degree to which the pursuit of material well-being even in a democracy can be a stand-in for other passions, such as the passion for love or fame or status. And genuine change *does* occur, though in a democracy it is not always easy to discern where and how and why. Perhaps it is best, as Socrates argued, to seek the answer to such questions not by looking at the phenomena themselves, which may dazzle or mislead us, but rather by examining changes in the meanings of words, where such shifts of meaning may be more reliably reflected.

Take the following simple example. One can witness changes in Americans' understanding of love over the course of the 20th century by observing changes in the use of the word "love" in the lyrics of popular songs. The examples here are endless, but there is no mistaking the change in both tone and meaning that occurred in the 30 years between, say, "Our Love is Here to Stay" (1937), the last of the great Gershwin brothers' songs, to the Doors' "Love Me Two Times (I'm Goin' Away)" (1967). Something *did* change during those years.

Yet despite how much we believe ourselves to be enveloped by change, we are usually unaware of how little has actually changed so far as our ideas are concerned since the upheavals of the 1960s. After all, the Doors' song is now over 40 years old. And yet I can rely for certain on the fact that nearly all of my students will know who the Doors were, will know the lyrics to their songs, and will know the lyrics to an astonishing number of popular songs that were already considered to be venerable classics when I was in college in the 1970s. This is astonishing.

Coincidences, Chesterton said, are spiritual puns, so perhaps it was not really a coincidence when, shortly after talking with my students about how we treat the subject of love much differently in modern music than in earlier times, I found myself at the supermarket and heard the strains of the Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." It seemed strange to hear the lyrics of this grubby adolescent song in a supermarket, of all places, but what made it especially strange was precisely the fact that it was *not* strange, that it was the most commonplace thing imaginable. And that fact points toward something that has *not* changed in the past four decades.

My point here is that, contrary to our dubious pride in our cutting-edge progressivism as a culture, and contrary to the myth that contemporary American culture is an endlessly changeable cornucopia of fertile invention, we are in fact stuck in the Sixties. We are stuck in the grip of certain prejudices, shibboleths, and cultural predispositions that are long overdue for a probing reexamination and a serious overhaul.

Whence this raging cultural stagnation, self-disguised as kaleidoscopic change? It could be attributed partly to the oppressive demographic overrepresentation of the ever-voluble baby boomers, for whom every

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Phillips Bradley (New York: Knopf, 1945), Vol. 2, p. 228.

human experience—formerly sex, now menopause and receding gum lines—is seemingly being undergone for the first time because it is the first time that *they* have undergone it. But the problem is deeper than that. It goes to the continuing hold of certain ideas, which are no longer new but somehow have not yet been understood to be old and obsolete.

**THE CULTURE OF "COUNTERCULTURE"**

Those ideas are well represented, once again, by certain words. Take, for example, the term "counterculture." When future historians look back at our own era, one of the oddities they will surely notice is the peculiarly exalted status of this word and the idea behind it. What it marks, among other things, is the way that a self-consciously oppositional ethos has become dominant among college-educated and culturally aspirant Americans. This observation was at the heart of journalist David Brooks's hilarious but also thoroughly accurate depiction of the "bourgeois bohemian" in his book *Bobos in Paradise*.[4]

Not so very long ago, perhaps even as recently as 1964 or so, the quest for liberation from social convention carried certain perils. Today we have made that quest into a new social convention in its own right, with its own canons of respectability, such as the routine celebration of books and movies and other works of art solely on the grounds that they are "troubling" or "transgressive," qualities now deemed to be peculiarly meritorious in and of themselves quite apart from their specific content.

Of course, one of the many dirty little secrets of this ethos is that it rests upon a veiled form of class snobbery. There must always be certain unnamed "others," the gaping suburbanites and mindless rural rubes who are thought to sustain and uphold the philistine conventions from which "we" perpetually need to be liberated. But those "others" seem increasingly shadowy and hard to locate in reality. The specter of a monolithic "red state" America is an easy way to posit the continued pernicious existence of such benighted "others."

As a resident of a certifiably red state, however, I can authoritatively testify that we are all Bobos on this bus—or at least most of us. The new convention has been triumphant beyond its wildest dreams and now suffuses our popular culture and our advertising, assimilated into the mainstream in the most remarkable and incongruous ways.

Several years ago, my wife and I stayed in a meticulously restored Victorian inn in the meticulously restored Victorian town of Cape May, New Jersey. Two ex-artists, refugees from the East Village, run the inn, and throughout the house they display their utterly predictable "cutting edge" works (cutting-edge circa 1920, that is)—rather unimaginative montages and collages juxtaposing newspaper headlines with found objects and photographs. One might never even have noticed this artwork were it not that the owners posted a tasteful little sign at the entrance "warning" guests that some images might be "disturbing."

This was a sad and silly little conceit on their part—the thought that any of their customers would even notice, let alone be disturbed by, their artwork. And, truth be told, I suspect they do not believe it themselves, else they would never have posted the art throughout the house. But it remains terribly important to them to pretend to themselves that they are still pushing envelopes and slashing away at bourgeois complacency. They need that thrill of excitement to give meaning to their lives—even if (especially if) what they are actually doing is running a small business in the time-honored American way, the quintessential bourgeois enterprise catering to mostly well-heeled customers, operating that business out of a quintessentially bourgeois domestic structure worth millions of dollars, and spending the bulk of their time worrying about city ordinances and real estate taxes and college tuitions for their kids rather than clashing with the squinty-eyed mores and narrow minds that represent the "culture" against which they define themselves as

[4] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

"counter," but which exists largely in their own lavish imaginations.

Like the wealthy, suburban lapsed Catholic who still fancies himself a radical follower of Dorothy Day because he still cares so deeply about social justice, or the hot-dog TV journalist who makes a seven- or eight-figure salary but still thinks of himself as a "marginal man" who lives off his "shoe leather reporting" and a willingness to "speak truth to power"—or like the countless lawyers with tattoos, or stockbrokers sporting a single rakish diamond-stud earring, or professors with dreary grey ponytails, or middle-aged women who cannot bring themselves to dress their age—these New Jersey innkeepers are in the grip of an idea and a personal mythology that they nevertheless do not see as such and from which they have no desire to free themselves.

There is profound self-deception at work in people who luxuriate in the fruits of worldly success while disdaining the personal habits and cultural conditions that make such success possible. There is also a strangely hidden compulsion behind the need for such condemnation. Yet somehow even the most incongruous social conventions can take hold for a time, and in our era, the conjunction of a dutiful other-directedness with a dutiful rebelliousness seems by now so entrenched and commonplace as to be almost natural. Its existence would make it very challenging to be *truly* countercultural if one is of a mind to be.

**THE DANGER OF ABSTRACT WORDS**

"Counterculture" is an abstract word, and abstract words—such as "change"—play an essential role in such acts of cultural sleight of hand. Abstract words, of course, also are carriers of our highest ideals and aspirations: "justice," "democracy," "dignity," and "liberty." But it is for precisely this reason that we should beware of them and treat them as precious commodities, not to be wantonly profaned or corrupted. We should exercise skepticism, what Santayana dubbed "the chastity of the intellect," a guarded disposition that does not yield its favors readily or to the first ardent suitor.

That caution is especially appropriate in a modern democratic culture, so it is not surprising that Tocqueville took a keen interest in it and had insightful observations about it. Indeed, one of his most penetrating chapters was aimed at precisely this subject. To get the full flavor of his insights, it is necessary to quote them at some length:

> It has already been shown that democratic nations have a taste and sometimes a passion for general ideas, and that this arises from their peculiar merits and defects. This liking for general ideas is displayed in democratic languages by the continual use of generic terms or abstract expressions and by the manner in which they are employed.
>
> Democratic nations are passionately addicted to generic terms and abstract expressions because these modes of speech enlarge thought and assist the operations of the mind by enabling it to include many objects in a small compass. A democratic writer will be apt to speak of *capacities* in the abstract for men of capacity and without specifying the objects to which their capacity is applied.…
>
> These abstract terms which abound in democratic languages, and which are used on every occasion without attaching them to any particular fact, enlarge and obscure the thoughts they are intended to convey; they render the mode of speech more succinct and the idea contained in it less clear.…
>
> Men living in democratic countries, then, are apt to entertain unsettled ideas, and they require loose expressions to convey them. As they never know whether the idea they express today will be appropriate to the new position they may occupy tomorrow, they naturally acquire a liking for abstract terms. An abstract term is like a

box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please, and take them out again without being observed.[5]

To which one can only add something that Tocqueville did not anticipate but which is quite consistent with his observations: that the looseness and flexibility of abstract ideas may serve to conceal the fact that what appear to be unsettled ideas are in fact much more settled, even stagnant, than they appear to be.

Tocqueville's words suggest another danger: that these words can thrill and intoxicate and that their meaning can be made to expand beyond all bounds and inflate into something genuinely dangerous, or at any rate something deeply antithetical to their original meaning. It also suggests that a democratic culture may be particularly susceptible to such ballooning rhetoric.

Hence, yet another reason to be attentive to the ways in which abstract words become misused. To illustrate this point, look more closely at two such words: "experiment" and "promise." Both are abstractions of extraordinary importance in American public discourse. Both speak to values and characteristics that are thought to be centrally American. But both have largely lost their original meaning and have become drafted into usages that serve to undercut some of the very things they once served to support.

**THE EVOLUTION OF "EXPERIMENT"**

First, the word "experiment." It is a word with its roots in science but that came to express one of the central dynamics of the American nation. We speak constantly of something that we call "the American experiment." Few phrases better capture the sense of America itself as a forward-looking enterprise undertaken on the behalf of all humanity, where traditions are questioned, propositions tested, and countless lives are given a fresh start. But it is a word susceptible to all kinds of inflationary misunderstanding and misuse. What began with careful usage has become a vastly overextended idea of experiment as open-ended improvisation, unfettered and undirected exploration, with nothing fixed and nothing authoritative to stand in the way of self-assertion and social transformation.

One does not have to look very hard to find examples of the fact that, in today's culture, nothing stands in the way of our experimenting. Three examples are indicative.

An attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union named Marjorie Heins casually invoked it during the course of a March C-SPAN appearance in connection with the suit brought against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) by the performance artist Karen Finley and several others. You may remember Ms. Finley for her daring experiments with the anatomical uses of chocolate. She and the other plaintiffs had been denied NEA grants on the grounds that their works offended general standards of decency.

Ms. Heins thought the NEA's policy deplorable and marshaled all the familiar arguments as to why this was the case. But the clinching argument, in her mind, was her declaration that "we are as a nation collectively involved in a great experiment" and that our national commitment to experiment demands that we be "mature" enough to "contribute" some portion of our tax dollars to the underwriting of forms of expression that we do not like. Apparently, "experiment" is so central to our national life that we must subsidize it.[6]

A rather more disturbing example of the language of "experiment" appeared in a December 1997 op-ed piece in *The New York Times* by the eminent Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe. This column dealt with the looming possibility of human cloning. Tribe had formerly asserted that such cloning should be prohibited, but now he had changed his mind. A society, he

[5] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, pp. 69–70.

[6] "NEA Decency Standards, C-SPAN Washington Journal, March 31, 1998, ID # 102740, Tape 98-03-31-06-1, Purdue University Public Affairs Video Archives.

said, that "bans acts of human creation for no better reason than that their particular form defies nature and tradition is a society that risks cutting itself off from vital *experimentation*, thus losing a significant part of its capacity to grow."[7] What looks to the unaided eye like social disintegration is merely the next phase of the endless American experiment.

Neil Postman, one of the most perceptive critics of American education and popular culture, suggested in one of his books that we ought to install the idea of America as an experiment as *the central narrative of American history*. This means for him that we will now define America as "a perpetual and fascinating question mark," "a series of stunning and dangerous questions" that "will always remain unanswered." Or, as he says in another place, we have always been a nation "formed, maintained, and preserved on the principle of continuous argumentation."[8]

To some of us, a nation built on the principle of continuous argumentation sounds, at best, like a vision of America as a giant and endless faculty meeting. Moreover, it mistakes the means for the end, supposing that continuous argumentation itself can be a *substitute* for truth rather than a means of discerning truth.

More important, such sentiments beg the question of what an experiment is and of what it means to live in a country embodying an experimental spirit. A glance at the dictionary is helpful. It understands experiment in several ways, all of which strongly suggest the guiding idea of *trying* or *testing*. An experiment is always related to some specific end, some well-defined goal, some truth, hypothesis, pattern, or principle to be confirmed or disconfirmed. The key to an effective experiment lies in the careful definition of the problem, a definition that does not change in midstream and that always seeks to identify and harness regularities of nature rather than seek to transform those regularities.

[7] Laurence H. Tribe, "Second Thoughts on Cloning," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1997, p. A23. Emphasis added.

[8] Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

***The Framers' View of America as an Experiment***

In that sense, the American nation most definitely *was* an experiment at the outset. The Framers of the Constitution and the early generations of American national political leaders thought of it in precisely this way. Alexander Hamilton began the first paper of the *Federalist* with these famous words:

> [It] seemed to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.[9]

The word "experiment" is not used here, but the concept certainly is; and the word itself occurs in 24 of the papers in the *Federalist*—always used in a very matter-of-fact, practical, and unmystical way, with the clear implication that experiments succeed, experiments fail, and that is the process by which knowledge progresses. In contrast, it is useful to ask ourselves whether there is any conceivable way that Marjorie Heins or Laurence Tribe or Neil Postman, or others who so freely employ the language of experiment, would ever be willing to concede that the "experiments" they support had "failed." Are we perhaps instead talking about a commitment that is abstract and dogmatic rather than truly experimental?

In any event, the word "experiment" was used quite conspicuously by George Washington in his First Inaugural Address, where he echoed Hamilton's view almost exactly: "The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as

[9] Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 1, in *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 3.

finally, staked on the *experiment* intrusted to the hands of the American people."[10]

This new American regime was best understood as a careful practical experiment, not an open-ended utopian undertaking in human engineering or consciousness-transformation or anarchism, and the two principal ends of the experiment are made clear in Washington's statement. They are the preservation of liberty and the republican model of government.

In other words, Washington was talking about freedom and self-governance—or, as we sometimes put it, ordered liberty. He was not talking about an open-ended commitment to achieving absolute equality of condition, let alone the satisfaction of every desire and the drying of every tear. To meet with measurable success even in the stated goals of the experiment would be a fantastic and unprecedented achievement, difficult of attainment.

By the time Abraham Lincoln gave his 1838 speech on "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions" before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, the results of the experiment were in. "America had been felt to be an undecided experiment," said Lincoln; "now, it is understood to be a *successful* one," having conclusively proved "the capability of a people to govern themselves."[11]

But success, he continued, brought its own perils. As the Revolutionary generation passed away, there was the danger that the commitment to the republic would flag now that the success of the experiment was no longer at issue and the younger generation—the Children of the Experiment, so to speak—were left without a proper field of activity for their own heroic aspirations. Lincoln worried that "the temple must fall" unless "other pillars" be provided to take the place of the Founding generation. He saw a perpetuation of the spirit of sober experimentalism and experimental urgency as an essential part of any effort to perpetuate our political institutions. Perhaps this was why, 25 years later at Gettysburg, he recurred to the idea that the Civil War itself was a "testing" of whether the product of such a republican experiment "can *long* endure."

Lincoln was right. Part of the value of the idea of "experiment" is the sense of alertness and responsibility that it awakens in us. Hence its constant use in our public discourse.

We find the language of experiment featured prominently, for example, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's rhetoric. In his First Inaugural Address, a speech at a critical moment in American history that is often praised as an example of the pragmatist spirit in American politics, Roosevelt declared that the economic conditions of the day demanded "bold, persistent experimentation." We should "take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something." Clearly, Roosevelt's usage was different from Washington's or Lincoln's, but it still clearly linked the process of experimentation with verifiable results. Like a good pragmatist, he recognized that an experiment, if it really *is* an experiment, can fail.

### *Our Expansive Idea of "Experiment"*

As these examples illustrate, by Roosevelt's time the idea of experiment was beginning to slip its moorings. Roosevelt's language was already pointing toward the infinitely expansive idea of experiment that we increasingly hear invoked today. Such a promiscuous use of "experiment" can become the emptiest kind of banality ("life is an experiment"). More often, it serves as a way of putting an attractive face on the impulse to set aside all established norms, with uncertain effects (the husband who declares to his wife that he wishes to "experiment" with extramarital dalliances, or the teenager who "experiments" with drugs).

Not surprisingly, one finds the same slippage of meaning, at the same historical moment, in the faith-

[10] *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. W. W. Abbot (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1987), Vol. 2, p. 175. Emphasis added.

[11] Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838," in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832–1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), pp. 28–36.

ful register of popular music. Cole Porter's 1933 comic musical "Nymph Errant" opened and closed with a witty song entitled "Experiment."[12] Porter used the word in a spirit of lightness and self-conscious irony, but the more expansive meaning was catching on, and in this more expansive usage, a spirit of "experiment" could be more than willing to entertain the wholesale transformation of the American government and nation. And why not? In this view, the American project, to the extent we can even talk about such a thing, is radically unfinished and perhaps not even anything to take any great pride in—yet.

Fortunately, however, nothing is static or fixed. We are continually remaking, reinventing, and recreating ourselves as a people. Democratic ideals are being recast, and civic identity is in flux. Anything is possible.

A salient expression of this theme appeared in the late Richard Rorty's book *Achieving Our Nation*, an attempt to revive the fortunes of reformist thought in American political life and, more generally, its impact on efforts by left intellectuals to reclaim the mantle of patriotism for themselves.[13] Rorty believed it was possible for the left to build upon an American "civic religion" put forward by such "prophets" as Walt Whitman and John Dewey and channel patriotic sentiment into "progressive" causes:

> That civic religion centered around taking advantage of traditional pride in American citizenship by substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal goal. We were supposed to love our country because it showed promise of being kinder and more generous than other countries…. This was a counsel of perfection rather than description of fact. But you cannot urge national political renewal on the basis of descriptions of fact…. *You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual*.[14]

The last two sentences are especially startling, but the statement as a whole serves to make the point that there are some ways in which America is *not* an experiment and that it is unhelpful, even absurd, to talk as if it were. There is a big difference between saying, as Lincoln did, that the great achievements of our ancestors are fragile and ever in need of support and bolstering and saying that our country does not really exist and does not deserve our respect because it does not correspond with the dreams of enlightened intellectuals.

This is the language of "unfinished nation" taken to an extreme. "Achieving" our country is the sort of ungrammatical phrase that always should be a tip-off that an intellectual heist is taking place. We do not use the word "achieve" in the way Rorty has tried to use it. One accomplishes a task; one does not "accomplish" a country. One lives in it—unless, that is, one is a pragmatist who urges us to live in a dream country rather than the one that actually sustains us.

## "PROMISE" AND PATRIOTISM

The contrast between the earlier and later understandings of "experiment" serve to illuminate the con-

[12] The lyrics to this song are as follows: "Before we leave these portals to meet less fortunate mortals /There's just one final message I would give to you. /You all have learned reliance on the sacred teachings of science, /So I hope through life you will never decline /In spite of Philistine defiance /To do what all good scientists do. /Experiment. /Make it your motto day and night. /Experiment. /And it will lead you to the light. / The apple from the top of the tree /Is never too high to achieve. /So take an example from Eve… /Experiment. /Be curious / Though interfering friends may frown. /Get furious /At each attempt to hold you down. /If this advice you'll only employ, / The future can offer you infinite joy and merriment /Experiment, /And you'll see." Robert Kimball, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 157–158.

[13] See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Intellectuals and the Flag* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[14] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 101. Emphasis added.

trasting views of "patriotism" in the campaigns of John McCain and Barack Obama. To a very considerable extent, voters in 2008 are faced with a choice between, on the one hand, a candidate who offers restoration of a basically sound nation with a sound and proud history to its former self and, on the other, a candidate who offers the redemption of a nation with a shameful and disappointing history that has been sound only in its ideals and whose greatness is something yet to be fully achieved.

In this sense, it was striking when Obama, answering a question from a seven-year-old girl at a campaign stop in Elkhart, Indiana, opined that "America is no longer what it could be, what it once was. And I say to myself, 'I don't want that future for my children.'"[15] Obama seemed to be trying to have both sides of the argument at once: both redemption ("what it *could* be") and restoration ("what it once *was*"). They are both attractive in certain ways, but they are not compatible.

One can make a similar point about Obama's use of the word "promise," which became the dominant theme in his Democratic nomination acceptance speech, "The American Promise."[16] In structuring his speech around the idea of an American promise, Obama was also reaching back to one of the formative texts of American liberalism: Herbert Croly's 1909 book *The Promise of American Life*.[17]

Croly had used the term "the promise of American life" to refer to "the steady advance of democratic values and steady amelioration of social and economic problems"—in short, to progress that is meant to get beyond American ideals of individualism and limited government, ideals that he thought stunting and pernicious. In *Promise*, he provided a revisionist version of American history from the standpoint of the steady rise of progressive, cooperative, communitarian, corporatist, and nationalist ideals implemented by a large, activist national state.

Croly saw the conflict between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson as central to the struggle for American identity and thought that Jefferson, despite his defense of liberty, deserved to lose. But he wished somehow to split the difference, at least partially, and seek arrangements that would use "Hamiltonian means" to achieve "Jeffersonian ends," moving from laissez-faire to social intelligence and replacing the Constitution with more democratic and up-to-date tools of governance.

It was a flawed vision that glossed over the difficulty of reconciling those means with those ends and was based ultimately on a misunderstanding of human nature as infinitely malleable.[18] Most important for our purposes is the fact that it misconstrued the idea of "promise," a perfect example of the Tocquevillean false-bottom box in action. Croly invested the word "promise" with his own meanings, taking it to denote a potential yet to be fulfilled or yet to prove itself, just as we speak of a "promising" rookie baseball player or a "promising" new business enterprise.

***Promise: Looking to the Past Rather than to the Future***

This, however, is a derivative and secondary meaning of the word "promise." In its foundational sense, a promise is something "sent forward" (as its Latin etymology implies): an agreement, a contract, a covenant, a vow to do something or *not* to do something. A promise in this sense is a way that the past holds sway over the present. In a republic, where the people live by laws that they dictate to themselves, the law itself is a kind of promise in the same way that wedding vows or New Year's resolutions are promises.

[15] Quoted in Hugh Hewitt, "Obama's Vision: 'America Is No Longer What It Could Be, What It Once Was,'" Townhall.com, August 8, 2008, at *http://townhall.com/columnists/HughHewitt/2008/08/08/obamas_vision__america_is_no_longer_what_it_could_be,_what_it_once_was.*

[16] Transcript, "Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2008, at *http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/us/politics/28text-obama.html*.

[17] Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

[18] Wilfred M. McClay, "Croly's Progressive America," *The Public Interest*, Fall 1999, pp. 56–72.

A promise in this fundamental sense is not oriented toward the future, but toward the past. It is a way that the past restrains the present for the present's own good and assumes authority over it: as when we insist, "You *promised*!" One might think of Odysseus passing by the sirens, lashed to the mast of his ship—his self-bondage in that instance serving as a powerful symbol of the role that a promise takes in the moral orientation of life. In this sense, the Constitution itself, so often the object of scorn from Croly and other Progressives, can make a strong claim to be the promise of American life that serves as the basis for all our other civil laws and all our other public promises. Far from being dispensable, it is the basis of all else.

Interestingly, Martin Luther King, Jr., made use of a similar notion of promise. When he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington on August 28, 1963, 45 years to the day before Obama's nomination acceptance speech, he too used the language of promise in its older, pre-Crolyan sense. He did so with the marvelously homely, everyday image of a bank check as a promissory note:

> In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."
>
> But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.[19]

There is no doubt that King was calling upon an imperfect nation to do better, to live up to its creed. But he was also affirming that creed, affirming the "magnificent" work of the American Founders and the founding documents and referring back to them as justification for his march on Washington. He was couching his political acts in the terms of a specific promise that had been made in the past. He was saying, in effect, "Make good on the promise. Follow through!"

### *Obama's Understanding of "Promise"*

Obama's use of promise in his acceptance speech is quite different. The word "promise" is used many more times—32 by my count—and in many different and shifting senses, equivocally and promiscuously, so that one is never certain at any given time what kind of promise is being referred to and what source it derives from. King's clean, crisp, precise, and unpretentious use of the term has been lost in favor of slipperiness, inflationary excess, and diffuse meaning. A few passages are instructive:

> It is that promise that has always set this country apart—that through hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams. as well….
>
> We meet at one of those defining moments, a moment when our nation is at war, our economy is in turmoil, and the American promise has been threatened once more….

[19] Martin Luther King, Jr., "'I Have a Dream,' Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," August 28, 1963, at *http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf*.

[W]hat is that American promise? It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have the obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect.

It's a promise that says the market should reward drive and innovation and generate growth, but that businesses should live up to their responsibilities to create American jobs, look out for American workers, and play by the rules of the road.

[O]urs is a promise that says government cannot solve all our problems, but what it should do is that which we cannot do for ourselves: protect us from harm and provide every child a decent education; keep our water clean and our toys safe; invest in new schools, and new roads, and science, and technology.

Our government should work for us, not against us. It should help us, not hurt us. It should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who's willing to work.

That's the promise of America, the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper.

That's the promise we need to keep. That's the change we need right now. So…let me spell out exactly what that change would mean if I am President….

And we will keep our promise to every young American: If you commit to serving your community or our country, we will make sure you can afford a college education.

[N]ow is the time to finally keep the promise of affordable, accessible health care for every single American. If you have health care…my plan will lower your premiums. If you don't, you'll be able to get the same kind of coverage that members of Congress give themselves….

And now is the time to keep the promise of equal pay for an equal day's work, because I want my daughters to have exactly the same opportunities as your sons….

Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility, that's the essence of America's promise….

[P]assions fly on immigration, but I don't know anyone who benefits when a mother is separated from her infant child or an employer undercuts American wages by hiring illegal workers.

But this too is part of America's promise, the promise of a democracy where we can find the strength and grace to bridge divides and unite in common effort….

[I]t is that American spirit, that American promise, that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend.[20]

Clearly, for Obama the word "promise" has an almost incantatory power, but what, based on these passages, can one to say about its meaning for him? *First,* one can conclude that it has no fixed meaning and that what meaning it does have shifts back and forth between older and newer acceptations of the word, between King's sense and Croly's, and some-

[20] Transcript, "Barack Obama's Acceptance Speech."

times indeterminate territory that would not seem to belong to either one.

*Second,* there is almost nothing in personal and public life that cannot be touched by this promise. It will keep our toys safe, bridge divides, and bind us together in spite of our differences. It appears to be a commitment, which quite possibly has existed from the very founding of the nation, to the idea that we are fundamentally responsible for ourselves, that we are also our brothers' keepers, that we should have equal pay for equal work, and health care, and a college education for all. We never know who made these promises on our behalf, or when, only that we are entitled to seek their fulfillment.

This is a perfect image of how a powerful abstract word's dangerous hypertrophy can lead to both galloping inspiration and massive confusion. It is also worth noting that Obama consciously excises one possible meaning of the promise. The speech concludes with these words:

> At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise, that American promise, and in the words of scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.[21]

Interestingly, even though Obama made explicit reference to his words' source in Scripture, he also truncated this quotation in a highly significant way. The words of Hebrews 10:23 to which he alludes actually read like this: "Let us hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess, *for the one who made the promise is faithful*."

This is not a small omission. It removes the very basis of hope, as the original writer understood hope, by removing the assurances offered by the faithful one, who is Jesus Christ. The words Obama quotes are merely the empty husks left behind when the theological content is removed. How can one speak of the promise when there is no one anymore doing the promising? The word "promise" has, by his speech's end, become little more than a floating signifier that is not attached to any determinate source or destination but retains only a faint moral glow of its lofty origins.

## CONCLUSION

And so we return to the place where we began: to the problem of powerful abstract words—words like "promise," "experiment," "hope," and "change"—that are central to the commitments and aspirations of our civilization, that rightly play a role in our self-conception and our democratic political rhetoric, but that over time can easily be expanded or distorted into something very different from their most fundamental meanings. If Tocqueville was right, this is one of the intrinsic pathologies of democracy, a tendency in democratic societies ever to be guarded against.

But Tocqueville was not a fatalist or a determinist about such matters. He gives us ample reason to hope that the pathologies to which democracy is prone—the tyranny of the majority, the dominion of individualism, and the like—can be effectively combated and that our democracy need not succumb to such weaknesses.

Therefore, we Americans are not condemned to wallow forever in a bog of floating signifiers. Our most important words *can* mean something if we are intentional and attentive and rigorous in our own use of them and equally demanding of our public figures, whatever their ideological standpoint may be.

We should resist the grandiose invocation of themes of constant transformational change, of ceaseless experimentalism, and of the endless quest to fulfill America's ever-elusive "promise." At the same time, we should keep in mind that many of these same words, rightly understood, represent concepts and dispositions that lie at the very foundation of American life. The United States itself has its moral moorings in the great abstractions that are limned in the Declaration of Independence, the document to which King himself finally recurred.

[21] *Ibid.*

The current presidential campaign provides us with an opportune moment to revisit our misconceptions and replace them with better and more fully grounded ones—or, short of that, at least to resolve to be resolutely skeptical when we hear important abstractions employed with imprecision, equivocation, and obscurity. We should demand that our leaders fill such abstractions with actual content.

Perhaps a greater attention to our political language could even lead us to rethink our fetishistic attachment to the myth of "change" in which we have enveloped ourselves for the past four decades. Perhaps that is too much to hope for, but one can dream.

And yes, I too have a dream. It is less exalted than King's dream, but like his, it would be enormously conducive to the improvement of American life. I have a dream that someday, strolling in the aisle at the grocery store, I will be brought up short by hearing the strains, not of "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," but of the Gershwins' "Our Love Is Here to Stay."

That would be a change that I could believe in. It might even be the change, or one of the changes, that we need. At the very least, it would be a very promising experiment.

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