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Herbert Croly: Progressive Apostle

Sidney A. Pearson Jr.



Herbert David Croly (1869–1930) was one of the most influential public intellectuals of the Progressive movement in the early 20th century, but his influence was not limited to his own era. Croly’s ideas were also instrumental in shaping President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Following the 1932 election, there was widespread consensus that Croly’s ideas had been a midwife to the new political order. Liberal historians, such as Eric Goldman, who routinely describe the triumph of New Deal liberalism and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society as a “rendezvous with destiny” just as routinely cite Croly as part of the intellectual

“brain trust” that helped to launch modern liberalism.¹

Yet Croly is scarcely known today outside of the academic community. This is a most unfortunate gap in our collective understanding of modern liberalism. In order to clarify why we are where we are and how we got here, it is important that we recover an understanding of Croly’s role in the unfolding of this drama.

Life

Croly was born to live a life in Progressive journalism as a race-horse is born to run. Both of his parents were prominent Progressive journalists in New York City. His mother, Jane Croly, wrote extensively on women’s issues under the pen name “Jenny June” and at the time of his birth was one of the best-known women writers in America. His father, also a prolific writer, was a devoted American follower of the French utopian philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and edited a journal of Comtist thought, *Modern Thinker*.

There is a story that Herbert Croly was the first infant born in America

to be baptized in Comte’s atheist “religion of humanity.” How much of Comte stuck to Croly as he left home and matured has always been a matter of conjecture, but there is no doubt that the young Croly found philosophic ideas stimulating at a formative time in his life. Comte thought some sort of perfection was the future of humanity, and, details of that perfection aside, Croly clearly thought in those terms.

Herbert Croly originally attended City College in New York for one year before transferring to Harvard in 1886. Following the transfer, his father worried openly about the philosophically corrupting influence Harvard might have on his son. He had reason to worry. While at Harvard, the younger Croly wrote home that he had come to doubt that much of Comte was particularly relevant to modern social and political conditions, but he may have retained more of Comte’s perspective than he thought at the time.

In 1892, he married Louise Emory, a Vassar alumna, whom he met while he was attending Harvard. The couple was childless.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/MAPT-07>

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Herbert Croly

Born

January 23, 1869, in New York City to David Goodman Croly (1829–1889) and Jane Cunningham Croly (1829–1901).

Education

New York City College, 1885–1886; transferred to Harvard, 1886–1888. Withdrew from Harvard to assist and attend ailing father. Reentered Harvard 1892–1893; suffered nervous breakdown and withdrew. Reentered Harvard 1895–1898; withdrew again for unknown reasons and without graduating. Travelled to Paris, possibly to study philosophy. Awarded honorary degree from Harvard 1910.

Religion

None

Family

Married Louise Emory, on May 30, 1892. No children.

Highlights

- Editor, *Architectural Record*, 1900–1906.
- Author, *The Promise of American Life*, 1909.
- Author, *Marcus Alonzo Hanna: His Life and Work*, 1912.
- Author, *Progressive Democracy*, 1914.
- Editor, *The New Republic*, 1914–1924.
- Began working on a final book, *The Breach in Civilization*, in 1920. His friend Learned Hand read the manuscript and recommended against its publication. It was never published, and only fragments of the text remain.

Died

May 17, 1930, in Santa Barbara, California.

Notable Quote

“For better or worse, democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility, and hence from the adoption of measures looking in the direction of realizing such an aspiration.”

After intermittent study, Croly left Harvard in 1899 for unknown reasons and without graduating. He was, however, awarded an honorary Harvard degree in 1910.

Little is known of Croly's years immediately after his marriage to Louise and leaving Harvard. He traveled to Europe and may have studied philosophy in Paris. When he returned to the United States in 1900, it was as editor of *Architectural Record*.

Croly's major claim to prominence came with publication of *The Promise of American Life* (1909). Ever since its appearance, this work has been read as perhaps the single most emblematic statement of the Progressive liberal political aspiration. This one work catapulted Croly into the first ranks of leftist intellectuals, where he has remained ever since.

The next few years were especially fruitful for Croly. He followed up this

first work with *Progressive Democracy* (1914). But his influence on American Progressivism did not begin and end with these two titles. His most lasting achievement may have come in 1914 when, along with Walter Lippmann, Walter Weyl, and a few wealthy financial backers, he helped found and served as first editor of the *The New Republic*. The magazine still remains the gold standard for Progressive liberal journalism.

1. Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous With Destiny* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

Croly's health declined progressively throughout the 1920s. He suffered a massive stroke in 1928 that effectively ended his journalistic career, and he died in 1930 in California.

Herbert Croly and the Progressive Movement

What gave the Progressive movement its theoretical unity, in spite of internal quarrels among various writers, thinkers, and politicians, was its uniform opposition to the founding principles of the American regime. Progressives opposed the natural law and natural rights arguments of the Declaration of Independence in favor of a political science founded on historical evolution. The metaphors were typically Darwinian, and the substance was derived from German–Hegelian historicism.

The Progressive movement aimed at nothing less than the total and complete transformation of the American regime. In Croly's words, "The best that can be said on behalf of this traditional American system of ideas is that it contained the germ of better things."²

In practice, this meant a criticism of the Founders' idea of limited government with enumerated powers. In electoral politics, as it was expressed by writers such as Herbert Croly, Progressive democracy was built on an increased concentration of political power, primarily in the executive.

The primacy of executive power was not original with Croly; philosophically, he borrowed it from Woodrow Wilson, and in practical politics, he borrowed it from the example set by Theodore Roosevelt. What Croly added was to place the concentration of power in the broader context of the complete reordering

of the American regime and not merely a tinkering with institutions.

Collectively, however, the Progressive movement faced something of a theoretical dilemma. If progress means anything, it means movement toward something desired. What, precisely, did the Progressives desire? We all want to replace something worse with something better. The real issue turns on what we think is better or worse.

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Before Croly, Progressives were united in their judgment that the past and present were worse than what the future promised, but they were divided on what that better future might look like or how to achieve it. What has given Croly his enduring appeal among Progressive intellectuals was how, more than any other single writer, he filled in the theoretical blanks of what the future of Progressivism should look like and how to get there. What Croly wanted was clear progress toward political perfection that looked very much like the welfare-state system patterned after that of Europe in general and Germany in particular. His arguments have helped to form the fundamental liberal paradigm for over a century since he wrote.

Prior to 1912, both Democrats and Republicans fought for whatever

elements in the electorate could be mobilized to support a majority coalition for the general election. This typically meant a heterogeneous mixture of factions in each party that did not always fit well together beyond Election Day.

Parties could not afford to be primarily ideological, but Croly showed them how to be more ideological in the construction of electoral coalitions. We can see part of this in Theodore Roosevelt's adoption in 1912 of "The New Nationalism"—a term he borrowed directly from Croly—as his campaign slogan. Croly saw nationalism as the glue that held the Progressive electoral coalition together, but as parties became more ideological over the course of the 20th century, nationalism was not an easy fit in a tradition that was at war with the Founders.

The split in the Republican Party in 1912 and the election of Woodrow Wilson gave the Democrats at least a temporary electoral advantage in attracting Progressive intellectuals. Croly backed Roosevelt in 1912, but by the election of 1916, *The New Republic* threw whatever intellectual weight it had behind Wilson. After the war, Progressives like Croly broke with Wilson over the Versailles Treaty.

Then, in 1919, came Prohibition, which left Croly disheartened with Progressivism in general; prohibition of alcohol was a diversion from real issues. By the time he died in 1930, he was thoroughly disillusioned with electoral politics, which had not turned out as he had expected. But he may have been premature in his pessimistic self-evaluation: Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was right around the corner.

A reasonable question is how much Progressive intellectuals like

2. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909), p. 51.

Croly actually shaped the practical politics of subsequent elections. His father's intellectual mentor, Auguste Comte, wrote that "ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos."³ To the degree that Comte is correct—and there is ample evidence to support him on this point—it is always appropriate to begin any analysis of politics with the ideas that shape political movements. It is not always clear how much Comte shaped Croly, but there is little doubt that Croly shaped Progressivism. To read *The Promise of American Life* even a century after its publication is to be reminded how much of subsequent Progressive thought echoes Croly and how many of the tensions in Croly remain tensions within the liberal tradition.

The Bible of Progressivism: *The Promise of American Life*

It would be difficult to overstate the place *The Promise of American Life* has enjoyed in the library of American political thought, yet its significance cannot be measured by sales during Croly's lifetime. When he died in 1930, *The Promise of American Life* had sold only a scant 7,500 copies, and a first edition remains one of the genuinely rare books produced during the Progressive era. Its influence is not measured by how many read it, but by who read it and what they took away from it. Virtually every Progressive intellectual read it for the next decade or more, and his analysis of the nature of the American regime was incorporated into the foundational arguments of subsequent generations of Progressive scholars.

The Promise of American Life is not an easy read. More than one

reader has remarked on its turgid prose, and we may suspect that its routine appearance on college reading lists has confirmed the general undergraduate suspicion that "good academic writing" is an oxymoron. That said, a careful reader could not help but be impressed with the sheer breadth of Croly's analysis. He brought together a range of ideas and how they might fit together that commands a thoughtful response.

TO READ THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE EVEN A CENTURY AFTER ITS PUBLICATION IS TO BE REMINDED HOW MUCH OF SUBSEQUENT PROGRESSIVE THOUGHT ECHOES CROLY AND HOW MANY OF THE TENSIONS IN CROLY REMAIN TENSIONS WITHIN THE LIBERAL TRADITION.

Croly's argument in *The Promise of American Life* combined a simple thesis with a complex demonstration of that thesis. It is at least an echo of Comte. Progress can only be interpreted to mean movement toward greater perfection. What prevented progress toward a perfected democracy in America was not the influence of simple reactionaries, important as that was, but rather two distinct strands of thought that competed against each other and had their origins in the founding principles of the regime.

- The first was the Jeffersonian tradition of individualism and democracy.
- The second was the nationalist tradition represented by the more far-sighted Alexander Hamilton,

which, incidentally, was best represented in contemporary politics in the person of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt combined, in Croly's view, the strong national government of Hamilton with the democratic faith of Jefferson. Roosevelt would use Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends.

In Croly's account, each of these two Founders had a fundamental weakness. The weakness of Jefferson was his resistance to the growth of national power, and the weakness of Hamilton was his resistance to democracy. Excessive democratic individualism in Jefferson fought with excessive economic concentration of power in Hamilton. This tension between Jefferson and Hamilton had been the defining characteristic of American politics since the Founding.

Croly proposed to resolve this tension through the concentration of power. Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" reflected this synthesis. The purpose of this concentration was to resolve the conflict between factions that was the heart of the Founders' science of politics, but whereas the Founders' solution to conflict was to control the *effects* of faction, Croly sought to remove the *causes* of faction.

Like most Progressives, Croly tended to identify conflict almost exclusively in terms of property rights. The removal of property, or its redistribution, as a source of conflict would make the country more democratic, following Jefferson, and the state as the engine of this removal would utilize Hamiltonian nationalism. The end result would be a more perfect democracy combined with an all-powerful state.

3. *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. Gertrud Lenzer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), p. 83.

Yoking the concentration of power with democracy was a bold and startlingly original argument. Generally speaking, Progressives could accept Jefferson as a democrat even as they uniformly rejected his natural rights, but Hamilton was an absolute anathema, and Croly's invocation of Hamilton as a Progressive hero seemed inconsistent with the Progressive analysis of American politics. It ultimately broke apart not because democracy and the concentration of power are incompatible, but because free popular government and the concentration of power are irreconcilable.

How did Croly manage this precarious balancing act? Perhaps it was the obvious optimism in Croly that initially attracted so much attention, often from unlikely sources. It was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, no friend of the Progressives in general, who recommended the book to Roosevelt. The thesis of a powerful, charismatic executive certainly appealed to TR, as it later appealed to his cousin Franklin. It seems unlikely that either fully understood the nuances of Croly's arguments, but they well understood, perhaps instinctively, its rhetorical appeal.

Croly's argument may have been historically tenuous, but it had the virtue of embracing American nationalism in a way that eluded most other Progressives who were critical of any hint of American exceptionalism. It made the concentration of power seem to be perfectly consistent with the Founders' science of politics even as it undermined the logic of the Constitution as a system designed for free popular government.

Whatever their differences, which were real, the function of government for both Jefferson and Hamilton was limited because the purpose of government was limited. For Croly, however, the function of government was unlimited because the purpose of government was unlimited. The issue is not about the size of government, but about the purpose of government.

CROLY HAD MADE THE PROGRESSIVE APPEAL TO NATIONALISM DEPENDENT ON A CHANGED UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOURCE OF PATRIOTISM, BUT THIS DID NOT MEAN THE PATRIOTISM ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOUNDERS.

Croly thought that nationalism, represented by a warrior President like Teddy Roosevelt, would cement democracy with a strong national state. The charismatic leader who could somehow reconcile what Croly thought to be the conflicting strains of the Founding became a staple of Progressive historical interpretation that reached its climax in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. But the linkage of nationalism with Progressivism was torn apart in the Administration of Lyndon Johnson over the war in Vietnam and Great Society legislation. Much of subsequent liberal political thought may be described as an attempt to repair or at least come to terms with that rupture. It is a repair made all the more difficult by the improbable, not to say bogus, way that Croly originally tried to conflate the views of these two Founders.

There is no doubt that Croly's embrace of nationalism opened a potential fault line among fellow Progressives: How to be patriotic while simultaneously opposing our founding principles? Croly had made the Progressive appeal to nationalism dependent on a changed understanding of the source of patriotism, but this did not mean the patriotism associated with the Founders. Quite the contrary: "The higher American patriotism, on the other hand, combines loyalty to historical tradition and precedent with the imaginative projection of an ideal national Promise."⁴

Such patriotism is tied to the vision of a perfected future, not an actual past. "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." The new patriotic American "must be prepared to sacrifice to that traditional vision even the traditional American ways of realizing it."⁵

In short, Progressives are the repositories of true, higher patriotism, not politicians or ordinary citizens who are mistakenly wedded to the Founders.

Progressive Freedom vs. Property Rights and the Rule of Law

America's prosperity, for Croly, is not the result of its freedom, but of the accident of its geography. Citing the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, Croly makes clear that the days of the American frontier are over. Individualistic freedom associated with a unique geography is a thing of the past, whether we fully realize it or not. The future of

4. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

prosperity for more Americans will mean learning from Europeans who have already turned their back on the radical individualism of Jefferson.

Although not an economic determinist like the Progressive historian Charles Beard, Croly did argue that modern industrialism was the driving force behind the need to rethink individualism, property rights, and the rule of law. Because of the changes in the underlying social and economic conditions of American life, “the ideal Promise, instead of being automatically fulfilled, may well be automatically stifled.”⁶

In Croly’s view, the unequal and unfair distribution of national wealth that has developed under the auspices of Jeffersonian *laissez faire* individualism has created obstacles to Progressive democracy in the form of economic conflict. “The automatic fulfillment of the American national Promise is to be abandoned,” he writes, “precisely because the traditional American confidence in individual freedom has resulted in a morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth.”⁷

Up to a point, he notes, Jeffersonian freedom has been beneficial, but at the same time, it has made a more equitable redistribution of wealth all but impossible. What is logically needed, therefore, is centralized redistribution on a national scale.⁸

The inference which follows may be disagreeable, but it cannot be escaped. In becoming responsible for the subordination of the individual to the demand

of a dominant and constructive national purpose, the American state will in effect be making itself responsible for a morally and socially desirable distribution of wealth.⁹

Because the state alone wields the police powers, the state alone has the legal coercive powers necessary to redistribute wealth in a more socially desirable way. It is not, however, an argument for socialism (defined as state ownership of the means of production). It more closely resembles state control through a division of economic spoils in the wake of elections.

It is this quality that gives Croly his well-deserved reputation for providing a blueprint to a Progressive theory of governance. Elections would provide the occasion for a redistribution of wealth in which, eventually, the groups that receive the spoils will simply outvote the losers.

THE TASK FOR PROGRESSIVES IS TO EQUALIZE OPPORTUNITIES AT THE OUTSET. AMONG OTHER THINGS, THIS MEANS AN ATTACK ON THE VERY IDEA OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND THE NATURAL RIGHT TO ONE’S OWN JUSTLY ACQUIRED PROPERTY.

Croly does not advocate egalitarian results, but he does advocate egalitarian beginnings. Americans assumed—erroneously in Croly’s opinion—that everyone started life

with equal individual rights and finished unequally more or less as a result of greater or lesser talents and abilities. “Americans who talk in this way seem blind to the fact that under a legal system that holds private property sacred there may be equal rights, but there cannot possibly be any equal opportunities for exercising such rights.”¹⁰

In other words, unequal results are ultimately a manifestation of unequal opportunities. The traditional understanding of equality of opportunity as equal treatment under the law therefore gives way to the new Progressive understanding, which aims to ensure that all have the same opportunities. The task is then to equalize opportunities at the outset. Among other things, this means an attack on the very idea of individual liberty and the natural right to one’s own justly acquired property.

Moreover, as Croly likes to say, this fundamental truth of the present social condition has certain political implications. First and foremost, the Founders’ understanding of the rule of law will have to be changed: “Impartiality is the duty of the judge rather than the statesman, the courts rather than the government ... In economic warfare, the fighting can never be fair for long, and it is the business of the state to see that its own friends are victorious.”¹¹

To be sure, he goes on, the state must preserve “at times an appearance of impartiality,” but this is only an appearance. “It must help those men to win who are most capable of

6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 18.

8. Ibid., p. 21.

9. Ibid., p. 23.

10. Ibid., p. 181.

11. Ibid., p. 192.

using their winnings for the benefit of society.” This does not mean that everyone will be equal at the end of the day; it means merely that the winners will be chosen by the state rather than by an economic marketplace “for the benefit of society.”¹² The Progressive coalition in electoral politics would reward its friends who helped to elect them. It must choose sides in this contest: “A well governed state will use its power to promote edifying and desirable discriminations.”¹³

Progressive Democracy as Movement Toward Utopia

According to Croly, there was yet a final worm in the apple of Jeffersonian democracy, in addition to its individualism, that was an obstacle to perfection. Democracy based on individualism did not promote the sort of excellence in government that Jefferson had supposed. On the contrary, it produced “a sort of apotheosized majority—the people insofar as they could be generalized and reduced to an average.”¹⁴

At best, excellence in a Jeffersonian democracy produced only mediocrity because individual equality of rights undermined the sort of excellence that could only be a product of superior, which is to say “progressive,” education. The Progressive state, by contrast, would require Progressive intellectuals to make it work. Unlike Jeffersonian citizens who brought their unscientific mediocrity into the public square, Progressives brought scientific excellence into the policymaking

process, and who can quarrel with science? Scientific politics, in the form of public administration, would replace opinion with knowledge and politics with administration, thereby offering a solution to the eternal problem of conflict in human societies.

It is here that we come to the heart of Croly’s science of politics and, with it, much of the Progressive liberal objection to the Founders. Any serious science of politics will be built, implicitly or explicitly, on a view of human nature, but both German historicism and Darwinian science had challenged the notion of a fixed human nature. Progressives embraced both of these arguments and in the process rejected any science of politics built on any notion of practical limits as to what is or is not possible. It is hardly surprising that limited government was an early casualty.

PROGRESSIVES REJECTED ANY SCIENCE OF POLITICS BUILT ON ANY NOTION OF PRACTICAL LIMITS AS TO WHAT IS OR IS NOT POSSIBLE. IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT LIMITED GOVERNMENT WAS AN EARLY CASUALTY.

The American Founders had what may be called a sober view of human nature. They thought ordinary people were quite capable of greatness and nobility, especially if given sufficient freedom, but they also understood human depravity. Even the best of people could behave

quite badly at times. This is why the powers of government had to be strictly limited and arranged in such a way that the tyranny of either an individual or an overbearing faction would at least find the path to power difficult, if not impossible in absolute terms. In the words of Madison:

[I]n a nation of philosophers, this consideration ought to be disregarded. A reverence for the laws, would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason. But a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato.¹⁵

Imperfect human nature, in other words, puts limits on what we can reasonably expect from any form of government, but it was precisely “limits on human nature” that Croly and Progressives in general rejected. Progressive democracy, he wrote, required a different foundation:

Democracy must stand or fall on a platform of human perfectibility. If human nature cannot be improved by institutions, democracy is at best a more than usually safe form of political organization; and the only interesting inquiry about its future would be: How long will it continue to work?¹⁶

The purpose of political institutions is not to control or to regulate a permanent human nature, but to change that nature by changing institutions not merely for transitory

12. Ibid., p. 193.

13. Ibid., p. 195.

14. Ibid., p. 188.

15. *Federalist* No. 49, in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 340.

16. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, p. 400.

reform, but to effect a permanent change in the human condition: “[T]he sincere democrat is obliged to assume the power of heaven. For him the practical questions are: How can the improvement best be brought about? And, How much may it amount to?”¹⁷ Both are, to say the least, appropriate questions to ask of someone who does not try to disguise the fact that he intends that government play at godlike social engineering.

Croly’s Political Legacy

A hundred years after he first wrote, Croly is probably more widely read by conservatives searching for the foundations of Progressivism than by most Progressives. This is not because Croly has somehow been rejected by Progressives, but because the Progressive tradition in American politics has first built on his foundations and then forgotten him. The Left in American politics has been profoundly indebted to him—perhaps more than they know and certainly more than they acknowledge. We can see this abiding influence in both theory and practice.

Croly’s influence on the theory and practice of Progressivism is almost like an umbilical cord that cannot be cut without damaging how we understand Croly’s influence and

the Progressive tradition in general.

At the level of abstract theory, Croly was perhaps the first Progressive to openly embrace the idea that Progressive democracy aspired toward perfectionism and to acknowledge that its policies were shaped by this fact. In effect, Progressive democracy required at least administration by a nation of philosophers to make it work, and since the very definition of political perfection precluded political conflict, this made the abolition of the causes of conflict the ultimate aim of the Progressive state. The attainment of this end was the ideal in Progressive politics that joined theory with practice.

Practical politics meant that Progressive politicians would participate in this eschatological unfolding of history by removing first property and later other sources of conflict as the precondition for a purer form of democracy. This in turn required the concentration of power in the state in order to remake the national community into a more egalitarian and less individualistic community through a system of government regulation and income redistribution.

There is both an irony and an incoherence in Croly’s redefinition of democracy that reflect one of the tensions of modern Progressivism.

- The irony is that a new elite of Progressives will be the true rulers of the regime, and the many will rule only in appearance. This is, to say the least, more oligarchic and less democratic than most non-Progressive definitions of democracy allow.
- The practical incoherence stems from the requirement that these new elites, by the nature of the electoral process, must cultivate particular factions within the polity in order to rule. The result is a system of crony capitalism that is far more corrupt than the free-market economic system it seeks to replace, and rationalizing this political corruption may be one of its most corrosive features.

Progressive elites can and often do rule within such a system, but dividing the economic spoils of a zero-sum system, even with periodic elections, is more likely to increase than to decrease factional conflict. It is unlikely that either Jefferson or Hamilton would see any of their handiwork in such a system.

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17. Ibid.