

CHAPTER 2 THE AMERICAN RELIGION OF POSSIBILITY

Speaking in Madison Square Garden during his unsuccessful campaign for reelection as president of the United States, Herbert Hoover summarized the quintessential American self-conception when he said: “It is by the maintenance of equality of opportunity and therefore of a society absolutely fluid in freedom of the movement of its human particles that our individualism departs from the individualism of Europe. We resent class distinction because there can be no rise for the individual through the frozen strata of classes and no

stratification of class can take place in a mass livened by the free rise of its particles.” Not even the people standing in bread lines outside could impress upon Hoover the incongruity of seeing the country as a collection of free-floating particles rising and falling in an unresisting social medium.

Hoover was describing a facet of the American religion of possibility. In America, men and women have placed hope above memory. They have believed that the future remains open to national renewal as well as to individual self-transformation. They have refused to believe that anything in their situation condemns them to languish in permanent poverty, dependency, and weakness. They have rejected the idea that their country was locked by its history into an orbit of familiar solutions to recurrent problems. They have insisted that, both as individuals and together, people can confront and defeat the forces that prevent them from living more fully and freely.

Hoover’s claims highlight the social side of this idea of possibility. It is the belief that everyone can lift themselves up from the bottom, and win power to shape their immediate circumstances. In their own lifetime and the lifetimes of their children, they can escape penury and subjection, and achieve a measure of independence. A

family farm, a small independent business, or a stable, respectable job in an organization or profession, have been the most traditional bases of such an independence. According to this idea of social opportunity, class distinctions in America have never become so rigid as to prevent the rise of the individual.

Individual effort remains the primary instrument of self-empowerment. There may often be obstacles to this free movement of the “human particles” that individual self-reliance is unable, unassisted, to overcome. Collective action may then become necessary: people working together in their communities, jobs, churches, and clubs. To be effective, according to the dominant version of the American religion of possibility, such a joint effort must be uncoerced. Above all, it must never be commandeered and orchestrated by government except in extreme situations or over a narrow, well-defined range of problems.

According to this view, voluntary association does not suffice to make self-reliance effective for the broad masses of ordinary Americans. Governmental action may also be needed to make self-reliance work. There are many basic needs—like the requirement of universal public education—that will always demand initiative by government. Sometimes a great crisis, or the accu-

mulated effect of slow but profound changes in the organization of the society and the economy, may require an expansion of governmental activism. In its form and scope, however, such an expansion should be careful to respect the primacy of individual initiative and free association.

There has almost always been just enough opportunity in America to make this facet of the American religion of possibility plausible. Each epoch in American history witnesses its own paradoxical developments, extending social mobility in some respects while limiting it in others. Today, for example, there is evidence that, while the differences between rich and poor have widened, the role of inherited advantage, the hereditary transmission of property and inherited educational opportunity, has diminished.

The admissions practices of universities and the hiring practices of professional firms and big business have slowly extended the reign of meritocracy. The meritocratic opening may be less significant for members of the working class, with the notable exception of the strengthening of restraints on discrimination against people defined by the physically inscribed characteristics of race, gender, or handicap. However, working-class men and women may find it harder than ever to

grasp the structure of privilege and inequality in the country. The institutional complexity and regional variety of this structure, its wealth of manifestations and qualifications, keep it from being readily visible.

Faith in the power of the individual to better his or her life is the most prominent element in the American religion of possibility, but it is not the only or even the most important one. That religion also includes something more basic and something more ambitious: a belief in the unlimited potential of practical problem solving and a faith in democracy as a terrain on which ordinary men and women can become strongly defined personalities, in full possession of themselves.

The United States is a country of tinkerers. To hold the American religion of possibility is to believe that each of the problems that oppress, weaken, and frighten us as individuals can be confronted, problem by problem, through human effort and ingenuity. Americans resist seeing particular problems as the manifestation of hidden, hard constraints. They believe that the terrors of vast problems yield to the effects of many small solutions.

Use little things to break big things, says Saint Paul, describing an essential feature of the psychology of hope.

For hope is more the consequence of action than its cause. As the experience of the spectator favors fatalism, so the experience of the agent produces hope. A preference for acting over watching has been the most important consequence of the problem-solving attitude.

Social opportunity as a condition and problem solving as an attitude fail to describe the most potent and fundamental strand in the American religion of possibility: *faith in the genius of ordinary men and women*. Walt Whitman, in the secular bible of democracy, *Democratic Vistas*, cited John Stuart Mill's discussion of the twin attributes of a great nation living under liberty, redescribing them as central ambitions of American democracy: first, a large variety of character and second, full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions. The capacity for strong and original experience, rather than being confined to a small number of geniuses, heroes, and eccentrics, should become widespread among ordinary people.

This belief in the elevation of ordinary humanity contrasts with the pressures to conformity that have played so powerful a role in American life. Intolerance of actual difference—difference of experience and

vision—flourished amid the celebration of outward group distinctions. Yet the idea persists that no closed elite enjoys a privileged hold upon the capacity for extraordinary effort, experience, and achievement.

The soul of the ordinary man and woman hides vast recesses of intensity. The sadness of much human life lies in the disproportion between this intensity and the accidental or unworthy objects on which people so often lavish their intense commitments. That this reserve capacity for devotion and obsession can be tapped productively, for the good of the community as well as the individual, has always been a major tenet of the American religion of possibility. Democracy, Americans understand, depends upon *demophilia*, love of the people.

Here we encounter another subtle and paradoxical element of the American faith in the possible. A distrust of collective enthusiasms, especially when they seek to work through the power of government, has always been an integral part of the American faith. Thus, that faith contains a basis for the “countermajoritarian restraints” so famously prized by American constitutional tradition.

Trouble for American democracy and for the American imagination of the possible arises when disappointment with the results of popular democracy leads

to a perversion to which American democracy has often been subject: the effort to use the countermajoritarian power of a judicial elite to impose through judicial law-making what the people through their elected representatives are unwilling to achieve themselves.

There then begins a self-reinforcing cycle of popular political disempowerment. The oppressed minorities or social victims are defined as the wards of a cadre of enlightened and benevolent notables. As politics shrinks in scope and wanes in practical effect, the people lose interest in it and seek to cut their losses. They resist, for example, the substantial tax take required to fund the programs of an activist government. The political incapacity of the people becomes a self-confirming prophecy. What starts as a way to protect the many-sidedness of the future against the single-mindedness of the present ends as an outright expression of *demophobia*, fear of the people.

We shall later ask whether the present constitutional arrangements of the country strike the right balance between demophilic hopes and demophobic anxieties, and strike it in the way most faithful to the American religion of possibility.