

# How Equality Destroyed the Carnegie Family

Oh, how Andrew Carnegie adored creative destruction! How much he hated the past! His 1886 book, [\*Triumphant Democracy\*](#),<sup>[1]</sup> a breathless paean to “the Republic,” feels like a prayer, spoken as much in numbers as in words. Among the words of his prayer, none charms like Equality—none possesses a more explanatory power or expresses such warm devotion. Even the primary accomplishment of Equality, Progress, possesses neither the charm nor the power of this generative idea that altered the fate of humankind and that is the vouchsafe for all that Carnegie can imagine as good and worthy in the future.

Whatever else equality meant to Carnegie, it was a way of being, a condition that shaped the soul of the individual and thereby the soul of a people or nation. Equality not only unleashed the energy of the American people so that they would become the most prosperous in the world, but it shaped their moral condition, it suited them to live in a world of constant change, it liberated them from the dead hand of the past, and it engaged them in the frenzied and exhilarating “race” for infinite potential futures. Equality opens a previously closed universe while it simultaneously alters the person to live in a progressive reality. Carnegie wrote about a new political and social order, but he also believed in a new man—a man who no more has need for the hierarchical past than the modern scientist has need for Aristotle.

When the second wealthiest man in human history worships at the altar of equality, we ought to take notice.<sup>[2]</sup> Carnegie’s book reflected neither a need to justify his wealth in a democratic society nor was it a form of hypocrisy. Rather, Carnegie gave voice to a creed that celebrated and explained seismic changes in society, culture, and economy. He declared,

in the rush of modern history, a new dispensation of progress. This new egalitarian age sunders the past, radically empowers the individuals of the present, and makes of the future a blank slate of unknown but undeniably progressive change.[3]

"[I was] [b]orn a subject of the Monarchy, adopted a citizen of the Republic," wrote Carnegie, who made a great deal of this contrast and this move.[4] The reader recognizes early that Carnegie believed that all he had accomplished depended on the equality at the root of the American republic. Monarchy and aristocracy represent unjust hierarchy and privilege and they stifle growth, progress, change. Aristocratic inequality embalms people in custom and patterns of inherited power creating societies pathologically oriented to the past. Throughout the book, Carnegie assumes the superiority of societies in rapid and constant motion and that embrace change and mutability to those that wish to preserve. A healthy society constantly effaces the past.

Carnegie worshiped equality and he found his ecstasy in speed. Speed is the keynote of the opening paragraph of his first chapter. "The old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace," he wrote, while "the Republic thunders past with the rush of the express." The old is marked by limits, it is slow and slowness represents some basic failure of human potential, accumulated missed opportunities. He continued: "The United States, the growth of a single century, has already reached the foremost rank among nations, and is destined soon to out-distance all others in the race." [5] Life is competition. Competition is destructive of inherited forms and methods even as it makes a society creative and forward-looking. Competition means progress and when inherited privilege persists, competition is thwarted, the race is not run. In short, equality produces creativity and creativity accelerates the speed of change and this speed serves as the primary index of progress: A progress that can be measured with numbers.

The host of numbers and statistics that serve as his primary

means of arguing for the remainder of *Triumphant Democracy* all suggest a pace of change that should awe the reader and leave her as breathless as Carnegie's prose. Such excitement to see the empirical evidence of progress! Carnegie felt that it was his special fortune to be alive at the historical moment when the basic structure of historical development becomes clear and when the race is afoot. Whatever else one might label Carnegie's creed, it was a form of positivism and drew heavily on Herbert Spencer's historical vision of a progressive universe that saw in material growth the primary aid to moral progress. Unlike Darwin, Spencer saw a universe moving toward some more rational, peaceful and prosperous future in a sort of secular chiliasm. Like Marx, history is something to be overcome and, also like Marx, what is next is not so clear, though it is good.

And so for the powerful, for those whose fortunes testified to Fate's good intentions, this torrent of change exhilarated rather than frightened them. During America's great age of industrialization, all around them they see change, motion, and acceleration—the currents of a reality unfolding to something better, they believed. This is the psychic comfort that nineteenth-century positivism provided, allowing believers to put aside serious reflections about purpose and destiny, about the past and its role in the present, and about what might be lost in the creative destruction of American capitalism. Cradled in such comfort, they were relieved of thought in order to focus on action—for it was as men of action that they most participated in the unfolding progress, it was as men of action that they found the most tangible evidence that they were alive and that their lives mattered. Men of action, rather than reflection, would win this race and, in the process, bequeath a better world to those who take up the next leg of the race.

Men of action find memory a burden, and with speed they achieve a sort of forgetting. Milan Kundera reflected, in his

novella [Slowness](#), on this relationship between speed and a pleasant modern amnesia. The narrator, describing the obsessed need of a motorcyclist for speed, observed that

*the man hunched over his motorcycle can focus only on the present instant of his flight; he is caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is wrenched from the continuity of time; he is outside time; in other words, he is in a state of ecstasy; in this state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of fear is in the future, and a person freed of the future has nothing to fear.[6]*

And so Kundera associates speed with forgetting and forgetting with both ecstasy and fearlessness. Such intense focus on the immediate blots out all that is not in this existential moment and brings about ecstasy. But the forgetting necessary for such ecstasy is not just of the world outside of the experienced bliss, it requires a degree of self-forgetting. A person who can escape the sadness of bitter memories or the melancholy of remembered delights that are forever gone, can enter fully in “pure” experience. Necessarily we approach new limits when we think of “pure” experiences since some understanding of self, some development of personhood, is necessary to participate in experiences of the sort we so often want in those moments of out-of-time ecstasy. Nonetheless, Kundera is right, I think, when he claims that “in existential mathematics...experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.”[7]

In times of rapid social and economic change, one expects a greater focus on action than on remembering—or, rather, memory comes more often in the form of nostalgia. For people who live in times of glacial change, there is no opportunity or need

for nostalgia. One lives much as one's grandparents lived and one has reason to believe that one's grandchildren will live in a similar fashion. Memory ties each individual to a story that stresses continuity and connectedness and the memory of one's own childhood is relevant to the man who becomes a father because the conditions of his children's lives are not dramatically different from his own childhood. But when the pace of change is great and one's past offers no relevant information on how to live in the present, then memory more often takes the form of nostalgia. One might pine for a remembered and often idealized past, but one does not expect it to serve as a guide to the present. And so speed does not eradicate memory, it transmogrifies it into nostalgia—something useless except as an experience that signifies alienation.

Speed and equality both separate rather than bring together; both stress things as abstractly understood rather than as encumbered. In this sense, they both liberate things and people from context—freeing them for more utilitarian purposes, or to be used as instruments rather than seeing them embedded in their contextual complexity. For people like Carnegie, who had built empires amid the destruction of the old, equality means opportunity and new beginnings. Equality means being unbounded by the past or by hierarchies that seek to preserve. Equality destroys “Carnegie” the family in favor of Andrew the man. And for the winners in the race, to win as Andrew is to suggest that the race was fair. And so in America of the late nineteenth century, these two concepts intersect in ways that contribute to an age of dissolution and consolidation, of destruction and creativity, of cosmic liberation and cosmic homelessness.

It wasn't only successful industrialists who found in speed and equality an intoxicating brew that tasted of progress. The America that these men and women of the Industrial age “remembered” was, in both nostalgic myth and reality (though

the myth and reality differed dramatically), about movement—often westward—that stressed creative destruction and the ability or hope that one could always start afresh. A myth of renewal was part of their cultural inheritance. The violent sweeping away of inhabitants of new lands to satisfy the American desire to be in motion expresses the modernist urge to power, particularly when one thinks of life in terms of a race or competition and when one associates efficiency and change with progress. The creative urge that remade these vacated lands reinforced equality as independent and abstract—of the individual who takes his chances in a new land, who has the opportunity to reinvent himself to people who do not know his past, and to succeed or fail according to the logic of chance and effort.

A thousand often savage inequalities emerged and dissipated over the decades. At any given moment one group defends a state of affairs on the ground of equality while another attacks the same state of affairs employing the same vocabulary of equality, if not always the identical principle. The historian struggles to understand countless such fissures in American democracy because the political and social vocabulary appropriate to the setting is so compact. Inescapable words such as equality contain a vast array of both meanings and contradictions, the richness of which brings about despair rather than understanding. Under the cope of equality, countless clashes over power, resources, and moral purpose, threatened national stability during much of our history.

We need not, however, become so invested in the equality sweepstakes in order to expose how equality-motion-speed produced great challenges to Americans living between the Civil War and World War I. Our focus here is on how these kinds of transformations offered great promise for those who wanted the new, just as it vexed those who found their way of living threatened by forces unknown and uncontrolled.

Countless Americans belonged to both camps—dazzled and dismayed by new possibilities that eclipsed familiar patterns, by new forces that promised to liberate, though they seemed alien and frightening. Equality, in almost any of its expressions, dissolved forms and fostered a protean age.

*Books mentioned in this essay may be found in The Imaginative Conservative [Bookstore](#).*

Notes:

[1] Andrew Carnegie, [Triumphant Democracy](#) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886).

[2] Worth \$281 Billion in today's dollars, according to Peter Bernstein, Carnegie's wealth is estimated as second only to John D. Rockefeller. See his book [All the Money in the World](#).

[3] The relationship in America between growth and progress, or between change and liberty, is rich and debatable. Some people want to stress a set of normative principles that anchor American understanding of liberty and order and they will often point to the *Declaration of Independence* as evidence. Often expressed as a species of Republicanism, people who stress America-as-idea will emphasize trans-historical ideals and the need for public virtue to remain faithful to those ideals. But other scholars emphasize what is clearly at least one powerful strain of Americanism—its emphasis on experience rather than abstract reason and its corresponding openness to change and growth. Historian John Patrick Diggins noted that from the founding of the nation, “America developed in ways that identified liberty with the power to grow and expand, to move out beyond its origins in an effort to be more than itself by appropriating whatever it was not, in a driving force of energy that the Greeks called *dynamas*.” (Diggins, [The Promise of Pragmatism](#), p. 19).

[4] Carnegie, p. v.

[5] Carnegie, p. 1.

[6] Kundera, Milan [\*Slowness: A Novel\*](#) (Harper Perennial, 1995), p. 2.

[7] Kundera, p. 39.

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