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The Idea of Fraternity in America at Fifty: A Symposium

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Introduction

Wilson Carey McWilliams, my father, published *The Idea of Fraternity in America* in 1973. When it was published, *The Idea of Fraternity* spurred criticism, debate, and at least some admiration; the book won the National Historical Society Prize in 1974. But the book's grand claims about the nature and course of American politics—claims that apply to but extend beyond the moment in which it was published—seem to call for longer-term reflection. Half a century after its initial publication, with its fiftieth-anniversary edition just published by the University of Notre Dame Press, how does *The Idea of Fraternity* hold up? How, if at all, does *The Idea of Fraternity* help us understand American politics in the twenty-first century (and beyond)?

In *The Idea of Fraternity*, my father argues that over the course of American political history, modern liberalism—with its focus on individuals, markets, mastery, and rights—has become ever more ascendant. This tradition has evident attractions, but it has exacted a cultural price. The American liberal tradition has brought into being a massive, impersonal, technological regime that erodes relationships, destabilizes communities, and inhibits collective action. In doing so, it has led not just to anemic civic life, massive inequalities in wealth, and environmental degradation, but also to widespread alienation, rage, confusion, and despair. Against certain conventional wisdom that the United States has gotten more democratic over time, my father believed an opposite story: that this is a nation ever bigger, ever more impersonal, ever more techno-bureaucratic, ever more individualist and isolationist—and ever lonelier and less democratic.

"Americans," my father intones in the book's introduction, "cannot find their country in the land about them."

But if modern liberalism is the dominant voice in American politics, *The Idea of Fraternity* argues that it is not its only voice. Most of *The Idea of Fraternity in America* is devoted to identifying an "alternative tradition" in American culture, a fraternal countertradition that does not obscure the human longing for relationship and understands politics as an elevating, collective endeavor. That alternative tradition can be found in a variety of political and literary sources: from the Puritans to the Anti-Federalists to Mark Twain. Notably, *The Idea of Fraternity* identifies the alternative tradition as powerfully expressed in African American political thought and in the writing and experience of American immigrants.

The Idea of Fraternity in America finds some native hope in this alternative tradition—or at least finds solace in its company. The book is in this sense both conservative and radical, looking within American history to try to interpret the American present and reorient the American future. As Alexis de Tocqueville, whom my father deeply admired, sought to identify those aspects of American culture that might mitigate the worst excesses of American democracy, my father's writing is focused on those aspects of American culture that might mitigate the worst excesses of American liberalism. He did not wish for liberalism's collapse; to paraphrase his friend Daniel Mahoney, my father was an anguished lover of liberalism. He knew that despite the excesses of liberalism, there are alternatives to the modern liberal order that are much more devastating and threatening to human dignity. Specifically, while my father was well aware of the limitations of modern liberalism, it was in part because he feared that modern liberalism often tempts human beings—precisely through their frustrated desires for fraternity—with totalitarian dreams.

The following essays, which were first presented at the American Political Science Association's 2024 Annual Meeting, reread *The Idea of Fraternity* in the contemporary political moment. In doing so, they help us to see not just about what that book might be enduring but what might be more broadly enduring about the trajectories and tragedies of American politics itself.

Politics Despite Liberalism

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Wilson Carey McWilliams's *Idea of Fraternity in America* (*IFA*) speaks to a pressing question. Some political theorists these days want to move toward a "postliberal future" by pushing for "regime change."[1] Americans who distrust the extravagance of that "postliberal" approach but who nevertheless hunger for something more real and rooted than modern individualism need help navigating a middle path. I'd like to point out three ways that *IFA* can help its twenty-first-century readers remain critics of liberal political philosophy while avoiding postliberal hubris.

First, although *IFA*'s idea of fraternity challenges the ruling ideas of the modern rights-based technological state, it is not itself a ruling idea in waiting. As McWilliams defines it, fraternity means those bonds of "intense interpersonal affection" that entice us out of our self-centeredness. Consequently, fraternity is limited in the number of persons it can encompass and the scale on which it can flourish. This means that fraternity is always in "tension with loyalty to society at large."[2] A regime—at any rate, a regime in a polity bigger than a small city—must be based on a scalable principle; fraternity isn't scalable.

Not suited to defining a way of ruling, fraternity is better seen as a principle active within and among citizens. McWilliams calls fraternity a "fact" and "method" of political life.[3] By this he means that fraternity is already with us—certainly as a need or yearning, perhaps even as an experience, however attenuated. Now, within the regime under which we already live, we can learn to perceive instances of fraternity and work to further them, even if the general tendency of our social and political system is to direct us away from fraternity. Fraternal politics, as McWilliams presents it, is political life not beyond but despite liberalism.

Second, although McWilliams thinks highly of certain political thinkers and political communities in the past, he does not posit a golden age before liberalism, suggesting by this silence that critics of liberalism need not depend on the possibility of a golden age after liberalism. The New England Puritans, founders of the closest thing to a fraternal polity within the American tradition, are the crucial case here. McWilliams admires the Puritans' congregation-centered and small-scale public life, their sense of the "community as a creative force, part of the necessary development of man's nature and the good life," their model of the polity as a "series of interlocking fraternities," the limits they set on excessive poverty and (perhaps more importantly) excessive wealth.[4] Yet he notes that the Puritans found themselves less and less able to "make inherited duties felt as personal obligations, to give inner meaning to outer practices." As the Puritan founders were replaced by new generations, outward forms and inward vitality began to clash, and bonds of community became constraints to enforce, rather than supporting structures into which individuals could be drawn gently.[5] Fraternity can't be banked; it must be continually renewed.

Some contemporary postliberals might argue that McWilliams missed the best models of nonliberal politics because he did not look far enough back into the past.[6] Since *IFA* is a book about American thought, McWilliams writes only occasionally and indirectly about the medieval era (mostly by way of Mark Twain's fiction). Yet *IFA* does suggest a response to the postliberal appeal to the Middle Ages. McWilliams warns that the "danger of the past lies in the possibility that men discontented with the present may turn to ancient romance, impoverishing both present and future by nostalgia."[7] If "Locke's theory, so important to America, begins with a dissent from Filmer on the nature of patriarchal authority," then fraternal thinking dissents from both Locke's progressivism and from Filmer's nostalgia—or more broadly, from both the modern individualism to which Locke contributed and the medieval order for which Filmer was a latter-day apologist.[8] As fraternity is in tension with the modern state, so a reader of *IFA* might surmise that fraternal experiences and principles would have been in

tension with the feudal and monarchical powers of the medieval order as well. After all, the medieval era contained its own fraternal countercurrents and alternative voices, most obviously in the monastic tradition. ("Obedience," writes St. Benedict, "is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but to one another as brothers."[9])

Third, while *IFA* does not offer encouragement to those who would overturn and replace the liberal order, it does offer principles capable of helping its readers endure or resist any unloving or miseducating regime under which they may find themselves living. McWilliams's manner of resisting liberalism may be the most perplexing theme in *IFA*, reflecting as it does a way of thinking quite different from the instrumentalism by which we are accustomed to approaching politics. This aspect of McWilliams's teaching resists summarization, so to introduce it I will rely on two fairly long quotations.

McWilliams sees liberal individualism as an inextricable cause and consequence of the whole modern social system, with its large polity, centralized state, industrial economy, and depoliticized citizenry. But this does not mean that the pursuit of fraternity implies the revolutionary overthrow of that system. McWilliams writes: "If men can recognize both the need for political fraternity and the fact that modern society makes it impossible, they will not necessarily discard that society. Compassion will probably forbid it; without the powers and resources of modern life, millions now living would be doomed not only to frustration but to death. Men can, however, attempt to provide the greatest approximations possible; they can make communities and fraternities more possible, more likely rather than less."[10] Our lives are so entangled with the rule-governed state and the benefits it (sometimes) provides, with industrialism and its technologies, that to abolish this state of affairs—as would be necessary for the creation of a genuinely post-liberal order—would be immeasurably cruel. Advocates of fraternity who live in liberal societies will instead seek to foster subtle changes that emerge from surprising places, hidden within or fissuring through or sprouting around the liberal order.

McWilliams recommends melioration of common troubles but also calls for disciplines so personal as to upset our usual definitions of politics: "Those who hope for fraternity in these times face three imperatives: to recognize fraternity when it occurs; to broaden the chance for others; to feel compassion for those denied the opportunity of fraternity. All include the obligation to set an example, the oldest duty of fraternity, in whatever sphere falls to us and our brothers. And all embody a duty to preserve, recreate, and add to the old tradition that made the idea and the language of fraternity accessible to humankind, so that those who come after may find a world in which the chances and hopes for fraternity are broader and less faint."[11] To recognize, to broaden, to feel: two of these three imperatives are calls for a transformation of perception and sensibility, an inward change that gives purpose to, but cannot guarantee, changes in laws or institutions. Affirming the importance of "partial moves and shrewd compromises" and calling on his readers to "broaden the chance" of fraternal experiences, McWilliams endorses the pursuit of policies that mitigate the unfraternal qualities of American life. Yet policy change has, for McWilliams, a secondary importance. The politics of fraternity, he concludes, depends above all on building—or, perhaps better, noticing—"a fraternal city . . . within an unfraternal polity" by learning to "recognize one's fellow citizens when chance casts them in the way, and to find means for affirming a mutual patriotism."[12]

What does fraternal politics look like? It seems to be less a strategy of state-centered reform than an ethic of engagement, or perhaps a set of dogged and unheroic virtues. This is, to say the least, ambiguous. How do you make shrewd compromises within an unfraternal polity without losing sight of the fraternal city? How do you seek that fraternal city without disdaining your membership in an unfraternal polity? Which "partial moves" contribute to the survival of fraternal possibilities, and which lead astray? Is there a point in the advance of modern individualism and modern technology beyond which fraternity becomes so marginal, so fugitive, that its possibility fades beyond reach? Ever the careful teacher,

McWilliams does not spell out answers. Throughout *IFA*, he relies on his readers to sort through what has been passed on to them, to confront the puzzles and absorb the meaning of fraternity for themselves.

Reflections on Fraternity in the Context of MAGA

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> *Twain's political behavior defies conventional categories. . . . Small wonder that the effort of critics to discover Twain's "ideology" has produced a bewildering diversity of interpretations: they cover every point in the political spectrum from . . . Twain as a reactionary anti-democrat to . . . a precursor of American Marxism.*[13]

Wilson Carey McWilliams's *The Idea of Fraternity in America* is a difficult book to categorize. In addition to standing apart from the liberal tradition as a whole, it also challenges the most common intellectual strands within liberal thought, whether on the political left, right, or in between. As such, the book is open to numerous interpretations, but it is also subject to misinterpretation. In this essay, I articulate *The Idea of Fraternity* as representing a *civic inclusive egalitarianism* that appeals to moral transformation rather than the state to mitigate crises of inequality. Thus McWilliams's unique fraternity-centered politics operates through civic norms and habits often associated with conservatism, but in the service of egalitarian ends that might be considered radically progressive. After situating the potential contribution of McWilliams's framework within contemporary political debates, I consider whether fraternity must be inherently exclusionary, using the example of the ascendant Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. Rather than a viable fraternal alternative to liberalism, MAGA may be seen as a symptom of liberalism's failure to address the human need for connection and group identity.

Fraternity as Civic Egalitarianism

At times, McWilliams writes in a sociological voice, exploring the nature of fraternity and its expression across human history. As McWilliams writes, "I presume that there is a nature of man, and consequently a nature of fraternity" (5). McWilliams's thought starts with the observation that human beings have an innate need for fraternity, craving security and support rooted in unconditional love. Further, McWilliams defines fraternity as a bond of "intense interpersonal affection," requiring "shared values and goals" to provide "emotional encouragement" and "sense of worth" (7–8). Finally, fraternity contrasts to patriarchy and matriarchy, which arguably provide similar benefits to fraternity, but not without hierarchy and authority. As an egalitarian relationship, fraternity is thus best suited to fulfill the emotional needs of citizens in democracies.

On the basis of his sociological analysis, McWilliams feared that the American political system denied or repressed the fraternal yearnings of its citizens. Following Louis Hartz, McWilliams reads the American founders as Lockean individualists, but he also observes that in contrast to their Anti-Federalist contemporaries, they saw a strong, properly designed central government as the best guarantor of individual freedom. Thus, not only does the individualism of the Madisonian tradition run counter to the fraternal impulse, so too does its statism. Madison's central concern was the inherent human tendency toward "faction," or groups that would abuse political power given the opportunity. *The Federalist* argues that a single central government would allow for a large republic, diversifying the number of groups, weakening the connection of any particular groups to individuals, and creating a more dispassionate political culture. Moreover, a central government would better protect individuals than would a system of independent states, so long as the system was designed with self-regulating checks and balances. The powerful but self-regulating central government would protect individual freedom and property rights while creating a system of dependence on impersonal institutions rather than factions: statist means deployed for individualist ends.

At the same time, McWilliams finds an alternative paradigm (and perhaps his own normative vision) within a countertradition submerged beneath America's dominant statism and individualism. McWilliams is most interested in the groups and civic institutions that have connected individuals and provided mutual support when government and market systems have failed: "Earlier, Americans knew or felt that when liberalism and modernity failed them, there was another world to which they could repair. Made most visible by the churches, the ethnic groups, and the small communities, it was what Americans meant when they spoke of 'home'" (618). The logic of fraternity turns the dominant discourse on its head. Emotional connection, psychological support, and group identity are all seen as important social benefits of fraternity rather than sources of faction, as in the Madisonian understanding of politics. Rather than seeing humans as atomized individuals, the fraternal alternative values collectives; instead of using the large republic, it works through local organizations and networks; rather than planning well-designed institutions, it aims at moral education and spiritual transformation.

The dominance of American individualism and statism does not preclude frequent appeals to fraternity. McWilliams notes many intellectual and popular movements have invoked fraternal discourse, but most often without critical awareness of the contradiction between the logic of fraternity and that of American liberalism. Thus, for example, McWilliams finds Emerson's appeals to fraternity "premised on a radical individualism and privatism" (285), while regarding John Dewey's communitarian rhetoric as "little more than a restatement of contractarian theory" (527).

To achieve the kind of intense emotional bonds McWilliams envisions, fraternity still needs to be experienced concretely, in the everyday lives of actual communities and citizens. McWilliams is realist enough to understand the difficulty of the task, frequently referring to fraternity as "impossible" in the modern context (65, 622). Still, McWilliams does not counsel despair. While acknowledging that the dominant systems all suppress fraternity, they are not absolute: "Such a fraternal city can exist within an

unfraternal polity only if men know the dangers that beset it and the possibilities it offers" (623). The fraternal voice is not expressed in a single archetypal or authoritative instance but rather in partial and often contradictory examples that need to be seen together as a whole to be understood fully. *The Idea of Fraternity* consecrates an alternative canon that despite its inconsistencies expresses a civic egalitarianism that has been submerged beneath America's dominant systems and discourses that support them.

Civic Egalitarianism and Contemporary Politics

McWilliams's unique framework does not fit easily within familiar categories often used to make sense of contemporary politics. How McWilliams's understanding of politics fits in the landscape is all the more complicated by the fact that most thinkers in the American tradition, left and right, fit within the dominant ideology of "liberalism," regardless of their political inclinations. Those who are now called conservatives would be considered modern or liberal according to ancient standards. Regardless of where thinkers are on the political spectrum, whether because of their individualism or their focus on the state, the sort of civic egalitarianism that McWilliams attempts to recover continues to be mostly marginalized in political discourse, both popular and intellectual, across the left and right of the spectrum.

On the one hand, the spirit of Lockean individualism continues to be expressed by classical liberals (now called neoconservatives) and libertarians, who accept inequality as a necessary condition to maximize freedom. Such thinkers share McWilliams's skepticism of the modern state, but they are generally much more sanguine about the prospect of markets and competition to remedy inequality by "enlarging the pie" through economic growth. Lockean individualism also aligns with religious traditions, particularly Protestantism, which recognize the spiritual need for religious practice independent of the state.

On the other hand, while affirming individualism in the cultural sphere, in contrast to McWilliams's civic egalitarianism, progressives today typically embrace a strong state for egalitarian purposes,

such as redistributing wealth, providing high-quality public goods, and enforcing civil rights. The notion of caring adequately for fellow citizens is inconceivable without a large and powerful state. While McWilliams shares concerns with the failure of market and government systems, the book rarely speaks of the welfare state or social engineering policy solutions typical of the contemporary left. Instead, McWilliams is more interested in larger cultural transformation, such that a strong welfare state might emerge from a deeply fraternal civic culture, but the policies themselves would be secondary to the norms producing and supporting them. However, this leads McWilliams to traditional "conservative" concerns of ethos, character, and spirituality. The book offers a radically progressive critique of what McWilliams saw as the dominant forms of progressivism, with the goal of saving, rather than abandoning, the egalitarian project.

Despite their differences, the dominant traditions across the left and right of the political spectrum in their own ways participate in America's dominant voices, thus appearing to force a choice between statist egalitarianism and individualist inegalitarianism. What is missing from, or at least submerged by, the dominant discourses is a way of addressing inequality without the coercive power of the state. Such an alternative would not be a centrist "compromise" but rather a third way that incorporates elements of the others while simultaneously transcending them. While difficult to imagine, civic egalitarianism offers the radical prospect of an alternative, nonstatist basis for equality—that is, equality rooted in care for the commons achieved through character development, moral transformation, and spirituality. An egalitarian consensus could then include those on the political right who are wary of bureaucracy and social engineering but genuinely concerned about inequality.[14] The fraternal tradition within American political thought offers this possibility.

Fraternity and Exclusion: Understanding MAGA

In everyday discourse, the first images conjured by "fraternity" are exclusionary groups, such as Greek fraternities and secret societies.

The word itself implies the exclusion of women. Fraternal groups provide a sense of solidarity and safety by connecting people with shared interests, but also by repressing difference within the group and by excluding outsiders. According to McWilliams, fraternity is "limited in the number of persons and in the social space to which it can be extended" (7), smaller groups are more conducive to fraternity (31), and fraternity is difficult to achieve in complex modern societies (622). For the kind of intense emotional connection among citizens to which McWilliams aspires, fraternity seems to be inherently exclusionary.

Since the publication of *The Idea of Fraternity*, American and global democracy enjoyed a brief period of ascendancy culminating in the early 2000s, followed by the current period of uncertainty and backsliding. With high levels of discontent directed toward both government institutions and the market, many Americans are turning toward MAGA and exclusionary forms of fraternity. In this context, something like MAGA could appear to be the last option for at least some Americans to satisfy their fraternal impulse. If the human yearning for fraternity is primary, normatively and sociologically, a strong American national identity would seem to be preferable to individualism, even if solidarity were created through the exclusion of those deemed different (in the case of MAGA, immigrants, criminals, LGBTQ+ populations, secularists and religious minorities, and others). According to this exclusionary logic, MAGA should be embraced because it gives at least some Americans a group identity higher than themselves.

An inclusive logic of fraternity leads to a very different understanding of MAGA. Instead, one might start from the premise that multiculturalism is neither good nor bad, but a condition of the contemporary political world. How to achieve fraternity in such a world would be a challenge within liberalism requiring constant attention. The highest forms of fraternity would involve those who work across division to unite disparate groups, even (or especially) those with fundamental differences of religion, language, or culture. From this perspective, MAGA would be regarded not even as a second-rate form of fraternity but rather as an illusory form, or

even perversion, of fraternity. For example, in contrast to McWilliams's understanding of fraternity, MAGA divides the in-group "us" from the outside "them," and it threatens the use of state power to enforce its narrow view of American-ness in the name of in-group solidarity. MAGA recalls McWilliams's "fraternity of battle," an illusory, "radically defective" form of fraternity rooted more in fear than love and one that dissipates once the enemy is defeated. Perhaps most important is that the fraternity of battle fails at moral education: "The fraternity of combat lacks the essential of true fraternity: standards and values by which the self is judged defective and guilty" (92). Indeed, McWilliams may have had something like MAGA in mind in cautioning against extreme or simplistic understandings of fraternity: "[M]any in recent times have set out to found the fraternal city and have seen their dreams transformed into totalitarian nightmares" (64).

A critical distinction drawn from the work of Robert Putnam may be helpful here. In his study of American civic groups, Putnam differentiates between *bonding* groups that "reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups" versus *bridging* groups that form connections across existing groups.[15] Fraternity can be established, or even created, through either method: through bridging, as groups converge on a common ethos; or through bonding, as marginal groups are excluded by the dominant one. A multicultural society is most in need of fraternity-through-bridging, whereas bonding within groups could actually be worse than generalized individualism: fraternity for some, perhaps even a majority, but at the expense of fraternity for all. While McWilliams does not himself distinguish between inclusionary and exclusionary fraternity, MAGA's hypernationalism can be understood within his framework not as a fraternal antidote to liberal individualism but as a direct threat to the forms of fraternity that are most needed.

The case of immigration is instructive. In contrast to MAGA and critics of multiculturalism, McWilliams never views immigration as a "problem" from the perspective of the established culture. Rather, he approaches the topic from the perspective of historical groups in their struggles for inclusion. To be sure, McWilliams

recognizes the within-group emotional support provided by ethnic communities to their members, but he sees it as temporary "solace amid exclusion" (102), rather than as an end in itself. Like the churches, localities, and political parties that also interest McWilliams, ethnic communities can exclude and divide.[16] However, McWilliams also argues that such groups provide individuals with the confidence and skills to overcome their isolation and participate in the larger world.

In addition to the overarching culture of liberal individualism, residential and educational segregation constitute enormous challenges to forming an inclusive civic ethos. However, concrete experiences of fraternity can and do bridge divides among established groups. Putnam points to the US military as an important institution that has diversified and advanced integration at scale.[17] Higher education has also worked to diversify the professional classes as well as foster inclusivity among them. Not coincidentally, both the university (along with elites generally) and the military are key targets of MAGA attacks on "wokism." While McWilliams's teachings might question whether institutional mandates alone would be enough to foster inclusivity as a civic ethos, the question should be how to supplement such efforts rather than how to roll them back.

The Idea of Fraternity in America anticipates much of the current sense of crisis and discontent with the liberal order. According to the logic of exclusionary fraternity, this discontent is attributable to a fundamental, diametrical opposition between fraternity and liberalism, and MAGA offers the prospect of a decisive rejection of liberal democracy. This logic, however, overlooks more complex forms of fraternity that work through the welcoming of outsiders and kindness toward the vulnerable. The urgent imperative today is not to abandon liberalism but to provide offramps from MAGA so that those who might succumb to the allure of exclusionary nationalism can experience and develop affection for the full diversity of American democracy. So understood, fraternity is an ongoing problem or challenge within liberal democracy, not its opposite.

A Pilgrimage Through *The Idea of Fraternity in America*

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The Idea of Fraternity in America (*IFA*) is a very long book.[18] With characteristic charm, Wilson Carey McWilliams himself apologetically acknowledges in the preface that it is "intolerably long."[19] The experience of working my way through it reminds me of the experience of walking, day after day, on an ancient pilgrimage route. The contemporary reader can't help but yearn, at moments, to find a speedier route to the destination. But the pilgrim remembers—if sometimes grumpily—that making the slow walking journey changes us; we don't arrive the same as we were at the start, and that's the point. Some truths simply cannot be arrived at any other way.

The truths in *IFA* are these sorts of pilgrim truths. They are the kinds of ideas that are important, strange, and ultimately deeply uncomfortable. On a quick read, we are likely to misunderstand them, on the off chance we notice them at all. To comprehend them, one has to slowly take them up and make them one's own. Pilgrimage reading allows for what we might call sanctification, the process of becoming the kind of person who will be able to understand and be "at home" in the ideas of the text by the time one reaches the end.

In the most straightforward sense, *IFA* is an account of the American thinkers who understand the truths McWilliams wants us to grasp—and the American thinkers who, in various ways and to varying degrees, fail to do so. (Often, the failure or success of a thinker to understand can be traced back to their receptivity to what I have described here as a pilgrim method. It is no accident that *IFA*'s index entry on "pilgrimage, concept of" directs us only to

those thinkers who McWilliams thinks also come closest to understanding the truths he presents: the Puritans, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville—whom McWilliams calls "The Pilgrim"—Mark Twain, and James Baldwin.) Primarily, though, *IFA* is a record of failures rather than successes. And in marking out the dilemmas and morasses the failed thinkers have wandered into, McWilliams incidentally points out the better route for the reader.

What is it that the unsuccessful thinkers fail to grasp? What truths do they not understand? McWilliams marks and describes their failures in a somewhat surprising way: using the language of sin. Throughout the text, in critical engagements with dozens of thinkers, McWilliams repeatedly asserts that *the* problem with so-and-so is that they simply don't understand the idea of sin. This is the source of their theoretical misunderstandings or the failures of their political projects or the cause of the superficiality of their art. And the reader keeps noticing this and eventually is provoked to ask the same question that the book demands of every thinker: Do *I* understand sin? Sin is not, after all, a concept with which political theorists these days frequently grapple. And this, it seems to me, is exactly what McWilliams wants us to do: to be led, slowly, to wonder about a question that modern minds might be very predisposed not to consider at all, to ignore or to quickly brush past.

Here's what I found as I considered it. The book gives the fullest account of what sin is in the chapter on Hawthorne. McWilliams writes admiringly that Hawthorne understood that there are two types of sin. One is original sin: "the concern for the security and gratification of the physical self with which man is born."[20] The baggage of birth here is somewhat ambiguously dual: The sinful encumbrance is both the physical self and the concern for that physical self's security and gratification. This first type of sin is also ambiguous in its effects. On the one hand, lawlessly, our desires for pleasure might strain against duty, legal orders, and obligation to one's fellows. On the other hand, our desire to gratify the body's animal inclinations for comfort and security may lead us into conformity and the betrayal of our ideals. On McWilliams's

reading, this type of sin is original to all of us equally, and equally it is inescapable; it reflects, he says, "the frailty of flesh."[21] Original sin posits a foundational equality between everyone, not in how we react to or respond to the frailty of flesh but in the position that we all occupy, the conditions to which our life is a response. It suggests we are all born into a constitutive difficulty we can neither fully avoid nor fully resolve, a difficulty we have to live within. And that means that our actions always take place under a kind of tension and that any political theorist who wants to talk about political action must reckon with this condition, this reality. Original sin is political in that it has consequences for what's politically possible and what politics has to grapple with.

The second type of sin McWilliams reads out of Hawthorne is what he terms ultimate sin. Ultimate sin "is the sin of ends and not of beginnings. It is based on the seductions of the ideal and the temptations of pride which lead men to claim they have laid bare the mysteries of the cosmos."[22] He then continues—and this is really the pith of it—that ultimate sin particularly leads individuals "to claim they have achieved freedom from human limitations and dependence . . . [and] disdains the subtle webs that bind spirit and body, man and man, man and his world."[23] Ultimate sin is, as the name implies, worse than original sin. It is something we choose rather than something we are condemned to navigate. McWilliams suggests that this desire for mastery and freedom leads us to seek impossible things, things fundamentally at odds with being a person. We may aim at the illusion of objectivity or may seek to deny and evade death. We are not equal in ultimate sin: McWilliams says it is not an inevitable part of being a person that we will have these sorts of sinful delusions. But it is certainly political, as so many of our political projects, actions, and assumptions manifest this ultimate sin.

McWilliams uses this dual framework of sinfulness to criticize many thinkers who fail to see the constitutive difficulty we are born into, or who fail to comprehend—and avoid—the sinful temptations of comfort and mastery that lure us in. Yet along these same lines, he also uses the dual framework of sin to praise other political

thinkers. In the final substantive chapter, for instance, McWilliams reads James Baldwin positively using this framework. McWilliams writes approvingly that Baldwin is attuned to how our experience as frail, finite, embodied human beings "is always a torment."[24] From within this torment, our task is to resist "the seductions of ease" (the original sin) as well as "the dreams of mastery" (the ultimate sin).[25] Baldwin understands that life is a torment, and he also understands that our experience of that torment provokes us to want to ameliorate it. This sinful meliorist impulse must be resisted; instead, Baldwin shows us that "the best life is bound up with its limitations, even with its agonies."[26]

Avoiding the sinful meliorist temptations of ease and mastery does not mean, either for Baldwin or for McWilliams, that we simply do nothing in the face of existence's torment. To say that the best life is bound up with its agonies does suggest that both better and worse versions of lives are possible. At the same time, it also suggests that our "best" is, in important ways, limited and that the best life is, in fact, aware of and *bound up with* those limits. Such a "best life" is endurable only with the fraternal support of others, for we are frail and dependent "and without the strength of others' support are worse than lost."[27] But fraternity, just like life itself, also has limits and agonies. It is not a panacea: Fraternal "dependence is often torture, involving fears of loss, misuse, or betrayal."[28] Fraternity demands, too, the "recognition of imperfection in the other" and, correspondingly, the acceptance that "the relation of fraternity would be as incomplete and imperfect as were men themselves."[29] Nevertheless, when McWilliams describes our pursuit of the (limited) best life as a "pilgrimage," he also says that we "find no small help in fraternity," which "open[s] the gates to man's pilgrim quest."[30]

Although McWilliams cuts off his discussion of fraternity and pilgrimage sooner than I would have liked, there is a tantalizing footnote here at the end. In it, McWilliams directs us, "for an explicitly political development of the theme," to James Baldwin's little-read 1960 essay "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes."[31] Baldwin's essay is brief, and it begins and ends

with reference to the chaos and difficulty of reality. It is here that Baldwin describes "the torment of experience" and here, too, that he describes our desperate sinful urge to escape reality, to "rearrange its elements into something we can bear."[32] Americans are particularly guilty of the sinful desires for mastery and comfort. At core, as Baldwin puts it, "we do not seem to want to know that we are *in* the world, that we are subject to the same catastrophes, vices, joys, and follies which have baffled and afflicted mankind for ages."[33] And, he continues, "this has everything to do, of course, with what was expected of America," a historical expectation of transcendence, progress, and power fleshed out fully and critically in *IFA*.[34]

The project of living the best life by being bound to our limits, then, is not merely an individual effort; it is the same kind of project that America must undertake politically. As McWilliams describes, America has engaged in a series of grotesque and insane denials of reality: the fantasy of a future utopian brotherhood of man free from conflict, a fraternity wholly united in battle against a shared enemy, a community between the reformer and the victims of social injustice defined by a "soft note of condescension," or variations on Lincoln Steffens's jubilant "I have seen the future and it works!"[35] America is steeped "in the belief that fear can be mastered by power," what Twain called the "lie of bravado" that imagines a wholly independent nation that rules through "strength and will alone."[36] Against all this, the best life for America will instead be bound up with limits and agonies: America will come to see that it, too, is *in* the world, subject to the same baffling afflictions facing all polities in all ages.

As McWilliams shows in *IFA*, the idea of fraternity in America has frequently been appropriated, in various ways, by political thinkers partaking of both original and ultimate sin. But the truth of fraternity is that it is not a utopian (or dystopian) goal, nor a "romantic and sentimental adulation of warmth and community as ends in themselves."[37] For McWilliams, the (imperfect) support of our (imperfect) brethren is a means, one that helps keep us moving together, through the torment of existence, on our (imperfect)

pilgrim quest. And though that pilgrimage itself has a goal, it hardly seems accurate to call it one: It is a slow and ongoing effort to see reality and to know where, after all, we are. As T. S. Eliot puts it, in words that could serve as *IFA*'s epigraph:

> We shall not cease from exploration
>
> And the end of all our exploring
>
> Will be to arrive where we started
>
> And know the place for the first time.[38]

Fraternity and Nostalgia

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American politics seems to be alternatively stuck in a time gone by or swept up in history. For nearly a decade our politics has been determined by our reactions—both positive and negative—to Donald Trump's campaign slogan Make America Great Again. The phrase harks back to a somewhat amorphous time when manufacturing fueled the American economy and provided jobs that allowed a broader middle class to enjoy greater economic security. For much of the 2024 presidential campaign, the choice was between two men who came of age during that lost time. Then-President Biden stepped aside to allow a younger, more progressive candidate to challenge President Trump's nostalgic vision for America. Kamala Harris told us, "We aren't going back." "We aren't going back" was a rallying cry with a hint of political philosophy. We are not going back to a Trump presidency. And we are not going back to an earlier era that was stained by racism and sexism. Harris often remarked that our nation lost its way during the past decade, and she more or less explicitly promised to return us to the path we were on —that is to say, return us to the path we were on in the middle of Obama's presidency. Kamala Harris would return us to "the right side of history," to borrow one of President Obama's often-used phrases. Obama understood history as a moral force that would prevail—his confidence, by implication, stemming from his understanding of this force as more powerful than human agency. It is possible to be on "the wrong side of history" temporarily, but history would eventually and rightfully reorient itself and leave behind those longing for the past. Our politics is caught between time and history—vacillating between a time in the past and a better, yet unknown, future propelled there by history. Neither vision of political life offers a way to navigate the present.

It is no wonder that "Americans, especially young Americans, cannot find their country about them."[39] *The Idea of Fraternity in America* offers us a way to reconcile our longing for a bygone time and our confidence in history.

Wilson Carey McWilliams reflected on the difference between time and history in an essay, "Time and History," that was first published in the *Yale Review* seven years before *The Idea of Fraternity in America*. "Men have times; mankind has history," he wrote. "Times are close and personal things. . . . Times are things of narrow boundaries and exclusive limits. History is comparatively open and indiscriminate. It refers to a stream of related events, made of up of myriad individual lives and times."[40] It follows from this difference between time and history that the importance of human beings varies greatly. "In times, a man has significance, meaning, and dignity; in history, the individual is only too accurate in seeing himself a finite and almost entirely dispensable unit of a great process which began before his birth and will continue after his death."[41] In the tone and style so typical of McWilliams, he gave readers the simple but hard truth about the human condition. "No profundity is required . . . to recognize that the separation between the two temporalities of man is one of the roots of human discontent."[42] McWilliams described human beings' effort to alleviate this discontent. "Men have always sought to control their times, endeavored so to manage events and environments that the times would be good. So, too, have they sought to predict history in order that, when the prediction enters the immediate world of 'the times,' it *may* be controlled." The impulse of human beings to predict history in order to control their times is a habit fostered by modern, liberal political theory.

In *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, McWilliams devoted early chapters to understanding modern political theory's partial account of human beings and the consequences of it. Politics based on modern political theory cares little for the soul and much for the body. "The modern and liberal tradition which informs most social scientists sees man as an apolitical animal concerned with the fulfillment of his private desires. In such a theory, abundance and

stability are naturally associated."[43] We are able to fulfill our material desires as a result of technology, but at a cost. Each technological advancement increases our dependence "on masses of unknown others. We become insecure, dependent, and fearful, losing dignity as we gain prosperity."[44] The ills of modern, liberal political theory would be exacerbated in America.

In addition to privileging material comfort, American democracy also emphasizes personal autonomy. "[American] Law contains a bias toward individualism, a hostility to communities, an assumption that material well-being and technological advance are in high interests of man." McWilliams reminded us, "Almost the only positive aim set forth in Article I of the Constitution is the 'progress of science and the useful arts.'"[45] America's vast land seemed to promise material prosperity to those who would seek it there. And, it may have, but not without fostering isolation. "[T]he alienness of the land and the loneliness of the frontier or the industrial city made men likely to feel warm about their past."[46] This is true of individuals from America's oldest families, as well as its newest. Because McWilliams argued that liberalism's tendency to privilege the human desire for prediction and control for the sake of material comfort came at the expense of our relationships to others and a more gratifying political life, he also understood the Americans' attraction to nostalgia for community. For McWilliams, nostalgia was not looking backward seeking to preserve a time that was on "the wrong side of history," but an effort to ennoble human beings and political life. "The quest for power in America always hints at longing for something lost or absent in American life, a desperate need for admiration and concern."[47] Fraternity, one expression of community, could satisfy the longing for what is absent in the politics informed by modern liberal thought.

With this more sympathetic understanding of nostalgia, we can appreciate that *The Idea of Fraternity in America* is "an effort to unite the two aspects of temporality,"[48] doing so in a manner that allowed human beings' admiration and concern instead of prediction and control. *The Idea of Fraternity in America* is a sweeping account of American intellectual history, which witnesses the logic

of liberalism transform the Puritan colonies into a constitutional republic and then into a large, commercial democracy. A mere glance at the contents leaves the reader's thoughts swimming in "a stream of related events, made up of a myriad of individuals lives and times."[49] The thinkers McWilliams examined are often, but not always, "dead, white men," as today's progressives would say to convey that they are "finite and dispensable." Yet McWilliams's treatment of America's thinkers was moored by the idea of fraternity in American political life. McWilliams described fraternity, in part, as an intense bond of affection with a limited number of people, who share goals and values.[50] In other words, fraternity places human beings in time; it gives the individuals "significance, meaning, and dignity." The search for fraternity in the American intellectual tradition may be in some sense nostalgic. However, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* is not merely a return to the past in order to relieve our sense of insecurity and alienation. Rather, McWilliams asked us to seek fraternity in the present as well as the past. By doing so, we can affect the future.

Liberalism may be the dominant intellectual strain, but it is not the only one. McWilliams knew that "novelists, poets, and tellers of tales" kept ideals such as fraternity alive.[51] Television's *Mad Men* aired after McWilliams's death twenty years ago, and so it is difficult to know what he might have thought about this tale of mid-twentieth-century liberal consensus. *Mad Men*'s main character, Don Draper, was emblematic of American liberalism. Don was a self-made man who built a successful career in advertising. Yet he had a nagging longing for something other than material comforts and autonomy. In Don's ad pitch for a Kodak slide projector during the first season of the series, Don gave expression to "the longing for something lost or absent in American life."[52] He also offered a definition of nostalgia and the projector's ability to satisfy it. As photographs from an earlier time in Don's life moved across the screen, Don told the Kodak executives, "Nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It is a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship. It's a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards. It takes us to a place

where we ache to go again."[53] But, the time machine returned Don to the present.

Carey McWilliams knew that we cannot simply go backward, but neither can we just go forward. McWilliams's move through the intellectual history in *The Idea of Fraternity in America* necessarily leads us back to our own time. "Those who hope for fraternity in these times face three imperatives: to recognize fraternity when it occurs; to broaden the chances for others; to feel compassion for those denied the opportunity of fraternity."[54] In doing so, we have meaning and dignity. *And* we find our place in history. "And all embody a duty to preserve, recreate, and add to the old tradition which made the idea and the language of fraternity accessible to humankind, so that those who come after may find a world in which the changes and hopes for fraternity are broader and less faint."[55] Tracing "the labyrinthine path of fraternity as an idea in the life of America," McWilliams connects the generations—including our own—to one another. Because the individuals in the past were significant, rather than dispensable, we might appreciate how they inform our present, even as we look toward the future. We are able to find our country about us.

Notes

1. Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (New York: Penguin, 2023).
2. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (University of California Press, 1973), 7–8.
3. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 5.
4. *Idea of Fraternity*, 121, 136, and in general 112–49.
5. *Idea of Fraternity*, 152.
6. Andrew Willard Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Emmaus Academic, 2017); see also Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2019), 1, 185–185.
7. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 455–56.
8. *Idea of Fraternity*, 1.
9. Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of St Benedict in English* (Liturgical Press, 2019), 94.

10. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 622.
11. *Idea of Fraternity*, 94.
12. *Idea of Fraternity*, 623.
13. *Idea of Fraternity*, 445–46.
14. Of course, those who regard inequality as simply good, rather than as a necessary condition of free markets and weak government, would fall outside this consensus.
15. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22.
16. On localities as a source of fraternity, see McWilliams's discussion of Jefferson's proposed "ward system." McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 219.
17. Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century," *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2007): 161.
18. Over six hundred pages of text, in fact. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, 50th anniversary ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2023).
19. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, ix.
20. *Idea of Fraternity*, 304.
21. *Idea of Fraternity*, 304.
22. *Idea of Fraternity*, 304.
23. *Idea of Fraternity*, 304.
24. *Idea of Fraternity*, 616.
25. *Idea of Fraternity*, 616.
26. *Idea of Fraternity*, 616.
27. *Idea of Fraternity*, 616.
28. *Idea of Fraternity*, 616.
29. *Idea of Fraternity*, 355.
30. *Idea of Fraternity* 617, 371.
31. *Idea of Fraternity*, 617; James Baldwin, "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes," *Daedalus* 89, no. 2 (1960): 373–76.
32. Baldwin, "Mass Culture," 374, 375.
33. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 375.
34. *Idea of Fraternity*, 375.
35. *Idea of Fraternity*, 541, 514.
36. *Idea of Fraternity*, 103, 449.
37. *Idea of Fraternity*, 517.
38. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets* (1942), http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/4-gidding.htm.

39. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, intro. Susan McWilliams Barndt (University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), ix.
40. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Time and History," in *The Democratic Soul: A Wilson Carey McWilliams Reader*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 229.
41. McWilliams, "Time and History," 229.
42. McWilliams, "Time and History," 229.
43. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 66.
44. *Idea of Fraternity*, 66.
45. *Idea of Fraternity*, 109.
46. *Idea of Fraternity*, 100.
47. *Idea of Fraternity*, 103.
48. McWilliams, "Time and History," 229.
49. McWilliams, "Time and History," 229.
50. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 7.
51. *Idea of Fraternity*, 111.
52. *Idea of Fraternity*, 103.
53. *Mad Men*, series 1, episode 13, "The Wheel," by Matthew Weiner and Robin Veith, aired October 18, 2007,
54. McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity*, 94
55. *Idea of Fraternity*, 94.