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IN RETROSPECT: LOUIS HARTZ'S *THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN AMERICA*

James T. Kloppenberg

Louis Hartz. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955.

Almost half a century after its publication in 1955, Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* continues to influence the way many Americans think about their nation and its history. Conservatives and radicals alike still explicitly invoke or implicitly embrace Hartz's analysis to support the claim that devotion to individualism and defense of property rights have defined American culture. In this retrospective assessment, I advance two arguments. First, despite its importance as a historical document, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (hereafter referred to as *LTA*) provides an inadequate account because its analysis is too flat and too static. Hartz focused exclusively on issues of economics and psychology and missed the constitutive roles played by democracy, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender in American history. He therefore misunderstood (as thoroughly as did his predecessors and progressive *bêtes noires* Beard, Turner, and Parrington, whose work he sought to replace) the complicated and changing dynamics of the democratic struggle that has driven American social and political conflict since the seventeenth century. We should historicize Hartz's analysis, understanding it in the context of the early post-World War II era rather than treating it as a source of timeless truths about America. Second, acknowledging the inaccuracies of *LTA* is important for us, because the widespread acceptance of its argument has had consequences unfortunate for the study of American political thought and poisonous for political debate. The time has come to refocus our attention away from Cold War era controversies over liberalism and socialism, and away from more recent controversies over liberalism and republicanism, and turn our attention toward democracy.

Hartz's thesis, advanced by means of a rhetorical strategy calculated to dazzle his readers, was simple and elegant. He conceded that his approach could be characterized as a "'single factor' analysis" with two dimensions: "the absence of feudalism and the presence of the liberal idea" (p. 20). America lacked both a "genuine revolutionary tradition" and a "tradition of

reaction" and contained instead only "a kind of self-completing mechanism, which insures the universality of the liberal idea" (pp. 5-6). In order to grasp this all-encompassing liberal tradition, Hartz argued, we must compare America with Europe. Only then can we understand not only the absence of socialism and conservatism but the stultifying presence and "moral unanimity" imposed by "this fixed, dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life." Moreover, the "deep and unwritten tyrannical compulsion" of American liberalism "transforms eccentricity into sin," an alchemy that explains the periodic eruption of red scares (pp. 9-12). In short, "the master assumption of American political thought" is "the reality of atomistic social freedom. It is instinctive in the American mind" (p. 62).

Hartz advanced his interpretation by contrasting, in a series of chronologically arranged chapters, the nation's continuous history with the convulsions of European revolutions and restorations. He insisted that Americans' shared commitment to Lockean (or, as he spelled it, "Lockian") liberalism enabled them to avoid upheavals at the cost of enforcing conformity. He used "Locke" as shorthand for the self-interested, profit-maximizing values and behaviors of liberal capitalism, against which he counterposed, on the one hand, the revolutionary egalitarian fervor of Jacobins and Marxian socialists, and, on the other, the traditional hierarchical values of church elites and aristocrats under various European *ancien regimes*. Unfortunately, however, because Hartz never paused to explain exactly how he understood feudalism or precisely what he meant by Locke or liberalism, the meaning of his terms remained vague and his central claims fuzzy.¹

It was an arresting argument, though, especially coming so soon after Senator Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist crusade and during a time of widespread national self-congratulation. *LTA* established Hartz, the son of Russian immigrants who had grown up in Omaha and taken undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard before joining the faculty, as a sage as well as a scholar, a lofty status he held until a psychological disorder forced him to retire from the government department in 1974, at the age of 54. Hartz's reviewers, historians as well as political scientists, hailed the book. George Mowry called it "extremely able and original." Arthur Mann credited Hartz with resisting the boosterism that had replaced critical analysis in postwar America. Ralph Henry Gabriel applauded Hartz for showing how the image of Horatio Alger helped create an ideology of "Americanism" that proved impervious to the lure of socialism. Marvin Meyers agreed with Hartz that Tocqueville provided a more promising path toward understanding America than did Hartz's progressive predecessors.²

But unlike those who still revere the book, historians also registered their misgivings about *LTA*. Mowry found "bewildering" Hartz's "claim for scientific analysis" and his reliance on "such terms as 'the democratic psyche'

and a national 'Oedipus complex.'" Mann sounded the historian's call to Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics: "the historian must somehow get *inside* the men of the past and recreate world as they saw it" rather than criticizing them, as Hartz did repeatedly, for failing to see the deeper unanimity buried beneath their strident but shallow quarrels. "Political theory does not exist in a vacuum," Gabriel complained; Hartz's vague and imprecise analysis did to American thinkers what Walt Disney had done to Davy Crockett. Meyers noted that whereas Tocqueville did indeed stress the absence of feudalism in America, he also emphasized the importance of religion, the legacy of English law and liberty, the fact of slavery, the uniquely elevated status of women, the distinctive pattern of decentralized settlement in North America, a set of sturdy political institutions and wise founding documents, and other socio-cultural, geographical, and demographic factors that together constitute the history of the United States.

The genre distinction between history and political theory helps to account for the divergence in assessments of *LTA*. The historians thought Hartz was flying too high to see clearly the details necessary for understanding the American historical record. Political theorists, as Hartz's student Paul Roazen has observed, instead saw that "Hartz had little interest in the study of political ideas as a scholastic exercise but rather wanted to use Locke as a symbol for a brand of political thought that could illuminate political reality."³ Hartz himself, responding to Meyers and to equally stinging critiques delivered by Leonard Krieger and Harry Jaffa, ascended for refuge to the sanctuary of high theory: "Comparative analysis," he instructed his slow-witted historian-critics, "is destined to produce disturbing results. In the American case it seems suddenly to shrink our domestic struggles to insignificance, robbing them of their glamour, challenging even the worth of their historical study." Moreover, and here Hartz cut to the heart of the difference between the historian's interest in the particular and the social scientist's quest for the universal, "the comparative approach to American history is bound in the end to raise the question of a general theory of historical development."⁴ Perhaps so for social scientists, but not for historians, who measure such general theories against empirical evidence. Krieger pointed out that historians always "qualify" and "pluralize" the grander claims of social science, and he insisted that Hartz's fundamental comparison between the United States and Europe was misconceived. Had Hartz compared apples with apples, Krieger argued, he could have arranged European national traditions geographically and discovered that liberty, equality, and democracy have mattered rather less the further east one goes. National differences within Europe would then loom as large as those Hartz had identified. Every national tradition is distinctive.⁵ Adrienne Koch put the same point more bluntly: Hartz's method "produces no substantial documentation or analysis,

but proceeds rather to pick up one name after another and freeze its arbitrarily selected essence to support the author's historical intuition. Individuality, chance, and the complex, specific coloration of a thinker's outlook are rudely sacrificed." Far from making "history `scientific,'" Hartz's method of comparison merely reaffirms assumptions he was "obligated to establish in the first place."⁶

Almost two decades after the publication of *LTA*, writing in response to yet another historian's critique of his cavalier treatment of evidence and failure to recognize the deep conflicts in American history, Hartz skirted the issue of evidence and reiterated his earlier proclamation of American uniqueness: "the United States is distinctive as against Europe, and its distinctiveness derives from the fact that the *Mayflower* left behind in Europe the experiences of class, revolution, and collectivism out of which the European socialist movement arose."⁷ The facts of history should be seen to flow from the framework Hartz provided, not vice versa. In his spirited defense of *LTA*, Roazen too invokes the genre distinction. He concedes the inaccuracies that critics have identified in Hartz's treatment of individual thinkers and historical incidents, then explains that "Hartz was all along basically using history for the sake of eliciting answers to some theoretical queries in connection with the nature of a free society; and those fundamental issues remain with us today."⁸

Those issues do indeed remain with us, which is why an accurate understanding of the nature of American political thought and experience remains important. Before examining the particular arguments of *LTA*, I want to note the almost complete absence from Hartz's analysis of four issues that now seem to American historians essential to understanding our nation's past: race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. To indict Hartz for overlooking issues that escaped the attention of most historians until recently seems unfair; such blindness surely typified most scholarly writing until the 1960s and still typified much—including my own—until even more recently. Even so, if one is trying to assess the persuasiveness and lasting value of Hartz's analysis from the perspective of 2001, acknowledging that American public life has revolved around crucial battles over race, ethnicity, and gender has become inescapable.⁹

The same is true of religion, which Hartz examined briefly in *LTA* but dismissed for reasons that merit discussion. Hartz contended that because religion in eighteenth-century America generated neither iconoclasm nor anticlericalism, it was of only minor significance. Colonial religious diversity "meant that the revolution would be led in part by fierce Dissenting ministers." In Europe, "where reactionary church establishments had made the Christian concept of sin and salvation into an explicit pillar of the status quo, liberals were forced to develop a political religion—as Rousseau saw it—if

only in answer to it." But American liberals, "instead of being forced to pull the Christian heaven down to earth, were glad to let it remain where it was. They did not need to make a religion out of the revolution because religion was already revolutionary" (pp. 40-1).

These passages reveal two important characteristics of Hartz's analysis. First, because the standard continental European—or, more precisely, French and Italian—division between an anticlerical republican left and an entrenched Church hierarchy generated cultural and political warfare that American religious divisions did not, Hartz concluded that religion in America could safely be fitted within the liberal consensus. Second, Hartz did not realize how corrosive to his argument was his concession that American "religion was already revolutionary," perhaps because, like many secular Jewish intellectuals in the middle of the twentieth century, he either failed to see or refused to acknowledge the pivotal role of Christianity in shaping American public life.¹⁰

In America, religious identity (like racial, ethnic, and gender identity) has not been merely epiphenomenal, simply an analytical category separable from the *real* class identity at the core of all social life, but has instead been a central, constitutive component of American culture from the seventeenth century to the present. Almost all Americans' "structures of meaning," to use a phrase of David Hall's, have derived from an unsteady blend of religious and secular, elite and popular, male and female, white and nonwhite cultures. For that reason religion does not shrink to insignificance but exerts a powerful force shaping individual decisions, interpretations of experience, and social interactions. The diversity of Americans' religious commitments prevented the emergence of a state church, as Hartz noted, but the depth and persistence of those commitments likewise undermined the simple, straightforward Lockean attachment to self-interested property-seeking that Hartz defined as the essence of America.

Locke himself was no Lockean, at least in Hartz's sense of the word, because of the depth of his Calvinist convictions. Similarly Americans from the seventeenth century onward have struggled—as Tocqueville and Max Weber saw much more clearly than Hartz did—not merely for riches but also for salvation as they understood it. That quest has carried them toward a variety of goals not reducible to the simple maximizing of self-interest that drove and defined Hartz's liberal tradition. Unlike the subtler, and consequently more enduring, work by Hartz's contemporaries ranging from Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray to Gunnar Myrdal, who emphasized the complex relation between America's Christian roots and the nation's sense of its moral and political failures, *LTA* simplifies this crucial issue.¹¹

* * *

As I examine the principal arguments Hartz advanced, I will very briefly compare his characterizations of (1) the American Revolution, (2) antebellum American politics, (3) the progressive era, (4) the New Deal, and (5) the culture of the post-World War II United States with the findings of more recent historical scholarship. It would be pointless to criticize Hartz for failing to see what it has taken half a century of historical scholarship to make clear, but it is important to see why *LTA* is no longer a reliable guide to the history of American public life. For reasons I will outline in my conclusion, the stubborn persistence of belief in an American liberal tradition of the sort Hartz described obscures both our understanding of our nation's past and our ability to envision strategies toward a more democratic future.

Hartz laid out the heart of his analysis in the provocative opening chapter of *LTA*, "The Concept of a Liberal Society." Although he admitted the presence of some conflict in America, its shallowness prevented the development of political theory. "America represents the liberal mechanism of Europe functioning without the European social antagonisms" (p. 16). That claim reveals his blinkered vision. Because American social antagonisms operated on fault lines different from those of European revolutionaries confronting landed and titled aristocracies, or from those of later European socialists confronting an entrenched, anti-democratic bourgeoisie, Hartz denied the existence of significant conflict and significant political thought in the U.S. Recent commentators, more alert to the depth and persistence of disagreements over the fate and place of, say, Indians, blacks, Asians, Jews, Slavs, and Hispanics; more alert to the gender wars that have divided generations, families, and co-workers; and more alert to the implications for political and social life of other fundamental cultural or religious differences, have put the problem in a different framework. In the combative words of Richard J. Ellis, one of the political scientists who dissents from the view that has prevailed in his profession since the publication of *LTA*, "Political conflict in the United States has been and continues to be animated by fundamentally different visions of the good life. . . . That all sides appeal to terms such as equality or democracy or liberty should not conceal from us the fundamentally different meanings these terms have in different political cultures." Even the most casual glance at scholarship from the last three decades dealing with race, ethnicity, gender, or religion would suffice to confirm Ellis's judgment.¹²

The American Revolution, to begin where Hartz did, was from his perspective no revolution at all. Compared with the French Revolution, which served as his standard of measurement, what happened in the War for Independence merely codified what had previously been taken for granted in English North America. If Americans disestablished the Anglican church,

abolished primogeniture, and confiscated Tory estates, they were merely bringing to fruition processes already under way. If they separated the powers of government, further divided authority by establishing a federal republic, and provided for judicial review of legislative and executive decisions, those mechanisms merely testified to their deep, preexisting agreement on fundamentals. The scholarship of the last three decades has obliterated this aspect of Hartz's argument, not only—to cite the most obvious challenges—by demonstrating the centrality and force of republican and religious rhetoric and ideals, but even more centrally by showing the creativity of the democratic mechanisms adopted to deal with the genuine conflicts invisible to Hartz.

The significance of the American Revolution lay not so much in the founders' liberalism, which was complicated by its mixture with republican and religious values, as in their commitment to nourishing the seeds of a democratic culture. They constructed or altered institutions that made possible continuous mediation, the endless production of compromises, a system deliberately calculated to satisfy some of the aspirations of all citizens and all of the aspirations of none. From the declarations of independence adopted by towns, counties, and states in the spring of 1776 through the ratification of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, Americans authorized their representatives to gather together and deliberate on the form they wanted their government to take. Precisely because they could not agree once and for all on their common principles, they agreed to make all their agreements provisional and to provide, for one of the few times in human history, a range of escape hatches for dissent, ranging from a free press to the separation of church and state, from judicial review to provisions for amending the Constitution. It is true that such comfort with compromise did indeed distinguish the American founders from later Jacobins and Bolsheviks. But it is crucial to see that they emphatically did not agree to codify atomistic individualism, because that idea appealed to practically no one—neither Federalists nor Anti-federalists—in late-eighteenth-century America. Although the sober-sided John Adams has attracted more attention than most of his like-minded contemporaries, both his doubt that republican virtue would eradicate sin and his disdain for profiteering resonated widely in the new republic. He and his contemporaries were not trying to make a world safe for bankers—whose work Adams described acidly in a letter to Jefferson as “an infinity of successive felonious larcenies”—but were seeking instead to create a liberal republic safe for worldly ascetics, a “Christian Sparta” in the phrase of Samuel Adams, where even those who failed to reach that lofty ethical ideal might not only survive but thrive. Codifying the procedures of democracy was their means to that end.¹³

Hartz's conviction that property holding and profit making exhausted the ambitions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans guided even his explicit analysis of state involvement in the economy in his first book, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776–1860* (1948). There Hartz argued that even though *laissez faire* did not exist in early America, the activity of state governments served only to facilitate economic activity. The same assumption also drove his interpretation of antebellum America in *LTA*. Among the most explicit and convincing recent challenges to that analysis are the distinct but complementary writings of William J. Novak and Elizabeth B. Clark. Novak has demonstrated both the pervasive regulation, in myriad domains, of economic activity in antebellum America and, even more directly challenging Hartz, the equally pervasive reliance of courts on the principle "*salus populi*," the welfare of the people, as the rationale used to justify that regulation.¹⁴ Clark has shown the presence and explosive power of a different set of ideas missing from Hartz's account, ideas of sympathetic identification with slaves and other oppressed Americans, derived from diverse religious and secular sources, that motivated antebellum reformers and eventually coalesced in a sensibility that helped generate passionate loyalty to the Union cause.¹⁵

From Hartz's perspective, the quarrels between Whigs and Democrats betrayed "a massive confusion in political thought" that stemmed from both sides' refusal to concede their shared commitment to liberal capitalism. Whereas Whigs really should have become Tories, and Jacksonians really should have become socialists, instead they all mutated into the "American democrat," a "pathetic" figure "torn by an inner doubt," "not quite a Hercules but a Hercules with the brain of a Hamlet" (pp. 117–19). To Hartz's champions such writing is brilliant, but it masks a strategy that Hartz himself lampooned when he saw it in others. For example, Orestes Brownson was, in Hartz's words "a classic intellectual"; in his disenchantment with America he "did not blame his theory: he blamed the world." Likewise Hartz, when confronting Whigs who advocated reform in a language of self-discipline and harmony and Jacksonians who spoke in terms of equality and democracy, refused to admit that antebellum Americans saw themselves, each other, and their culture in terms quite different from his. Rather than modifying or abandoning his theory, Hartz "blamed the world" of American history. He lamented the "veritable jig-saw puzzle of theoretical confusion" generated by Americans who might have pretended to disagree over slavery, temperance, education, Indian removal, and a hundred other issues when, viewed from his vantage point, "the liberal temper of American political theory is vividly apparent" beneath all their disputes (p. 140). The confusion, though, is Hartz's rather than theirs; it springs from these Americans' refusal to play their scripted roles as aristocrats and proletarians. Instead they enacted an

altogether different drama, with subtly nuanced and strangely amalgamated characters impossible to reduce to European types. The richness and complexity of the American historical record reveals the poverty of one-dimensional theory when it confronts that world.

Hartz conceded the anomalous quality of some southerners' defense of slavery, but he presented it as the exception that proved his liberal rule. Careful analysis of nineteenth-century America shows instead that within as well as between North and South, Americans differed on many fundamental issues. Only the culture and institutions of democracy (as Jefferson, Madison, and Tocqueville all saw) provided ways to mediate those deep disagreements. Only the election of Abraham Lincoln, who insisted that the principle of popular sovereignty must be yoked to the principle of autonomy for all Americans, made manifest that on one issue compromise had at last become impossible. Lincoln's election did not augur "the triumph of a theory of democratic capitalism" (p. 199), as Hartz contended. Instead it signaled, as Lincoln's Second Inaugural made plain, the finally irresistible power of the alliance between Augustinian Christianity and republican ideals, which ultimately inspired the North to uproot the evil of slavery, the deepest of all the divisions within the "liberal tradition" that Hartz imagined marching uninterrupted through American history.¹⁶

If Andrew Carnegie and Horatio Alger were "the children of Lincoln's achievement" (p. 199), as Hartz argued to explain Americans' purportedly unanimous embrace of *laissez faire* after the Civil War, whence sprang the populists or Knights of Labor, Jane Addams or Lillian Wald, John Dewey or Herbert Croly, Richard Ely or Walter Rauschenbusch, Charlotte Perkins Gilman or W. E. B. Du Bois? For that matter, how do we explain either Theodore or Franklin Roosevelt? Hartz understood progressivism, as did many of his contemporaries, including Richard Hofstadter, as Woodrow Wilson's futile hearkening back to a lost world of small towns and small businesses, an exercise in nostalgia with no political or economic consequences. Historians fifty years later must disagree.

Diverse and incompatible as their strategies were, progressives nevertheless constructed from the materials they inherited a new order in governance, law, business, social organization, and culture. Louis Brandeis lost his battle against bigness, yet the government regulation of private enterprise became a permanent fact of life. The NAACP failed to enact all of its program, yet the civil rights movement, launched as *LTA* appeared, employed not only rights-talk but images of deliverance and salvation from Exodus and Matthew rather than Hartz's language of the main chance. The crusade for women's rights reached only a limited fulfillment in the franchise, yet feminists have invoked a variety of ideals concerning moral autonomy, civic responsibility, and more egalitarian households equally incompatible with Hartz's frame-

work. Finally, the social democrats among American progressives failed to achieve their goals of a more egalitarian structure for work or wages, yet, from the platforms of the Populist Party in 1892 and the Progressive Party in 1912 through the agendas of the New Deal and the Fair Deal, such ambitious plans were at the heart, rather than on the margins, of political debate. To underscore the point, all were utterly inconsistent with Hartz's notion of an American liberal tradition.

Hartz, writing in the shadow of McCarthyism, expected that all the moderate reforms of the twentieth century would meet the same fate: "Where capitalism is an essential principle of life," he wrote, "the man who seeks to regulate it is peculiarly vulnerable to the waving of the red flag." Just as Hartz could concede the presence of regulation in antebellum America and dismiss its significance (pp. 209–10), so his magic wand made Addams, Dewey, Ely, Croly, Gilman, and Du Bois—and all they stood for—disappear. Where, he asked, were the American analogs of the British collectivist philosopher T. H. Green and the "new liberal" publicist L. T. Hobhouse, and of the French and German moderate social democrats Jean Jaurès and Eduard Bernstein? Whereas such Europeans shared a "frank recognition of the need for collective action to solve the class problem," Americans missed the point. Industrial regulation and insurance were but the "loose marginalia" of the progressive movement and Croly's democratic nationalism "practically unintelligible rhetoric." Trust busters who shared "the pathetic hope of Brandeis" wanted only to "begin running the Lockian race all over again" (pp. 223, 230, 233). In *LTA* the religious or ethical impulses that drove the social gospel, the founders of social settlements, and the architects of social security and government planning vanish beneath a fog of liberal individualism. Not surprisingly, the progressives' enduring achievements, from the graduated income tax through regulation of the economy, never surface.

European progressive reformers such as David Lloyd George and Léon Bourgeois could ally with socialists such as the Fabians or Jaurès, Hartz asserted, but that path remained closed in America. As I have tried to make clear elsewhere, this analysis relies on a widespread but faulty understanding of the dynamics of reform on both sides of the Atlantic. Moderate social democracy emerged in Europe for many of the same reasons, and made possible the appearance of quite similar coalitions, as those behind the more far-reaching American progressive reform measures. Those coalitions' disappearance had consequences as dramatic in England and France as in the United States. The consequences in Germany, of course, were far deadlier.¹⁷

Why did Hartz miss the substantial similarities and that dramatic difference? The answer reveals another reason why his analysis is no longer convincing a decade after 1989. "The attitude toward socialism remains, however, the final test of Progressive 'Americanism'" (p. 243). That standard

of judgment, reasonable as it might have been at the time, no longer seems compelling. How many decades should historians wait before inverting Werner Sombart's question and asking "why was there socialism in Europe?" Given his Eurocentric framework, Hartz understandably placed the piecemeal, pragmatic New Deal, limited as it was by Roosevelt's ability to forge a consensus from the fractured pieces of his party's coalition, comfortably within the liberal tradition.

Historians have paid surprisingly little attention to the New Deal's unfulfilled social democratic agenda. FDR's 1944 State of the Union Address called for a "second bill of rights" assuring all Americans access to education, a job with a living wage, adequate housing, medical care, and insurance against old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment. FDR campaigned—and was reelected—on just such a platform in 1944. Such proposals, which formed the core of the G.I. Bill, were also central to Truman's Fair Deal. This far-reaching legislative program, caught in the cross-fire between an incipient Cold War aversion to government activity and southern Democrats' animosity toward equal treatment of African Americans, was defeated so decisively in Congress that historians refuse to believe either FDR or Truman could have been serious about them. More consistent with Hartz's concept of a liberal individualist, anti-government straightjacket than with the historical evidence, such treatments confirm—indeed, seem to rest on—Hartz's judgment: since the New Deal did not try to bring socialism to America, its reformism must have been tepid at best.¹⁸

American historians should stop using socialism as the litmus test of reform in the United States. When Hartz was writing, the social democratic governments sweeping into power across Northern Europe had only recently traded in their comprehensive socialist economic programs for more limited agendas featuring mixed economies supplemented with more or less extensive welfare states. Although the Social Democratic Party of Germany continued to speak the language of Marxism until the Bad Godesberg program of 1959, it was already getting lonely for those on the left who insisted on ideological purity. Elsewhere in Western Europe the coalitions of urban professionals, farmers, and industrial workers that supported postwar social democratic governments had already surrendered the apocalyptic rhetoric of revolution. As Claus Offe and, more recently, Herrick Chapman and George Reid Andrews have pointed out, the post-World War II welfare states of Northern Europe depended more on a democratic consensus than American liberal democracy ever did. The intensified pressure of unprecedented immigration and the subsequent diversification of population have led to increasingly wary and ungenerous electorates everywhere; only in America did progressives ever dare to proclaim that they were building their coalitions, as FDR and Truman (and later Lyndon Johnson) did, on celebra-

tions of such diversity. In Scandinavia, as in Britain and throughout north-western Europe, voters backed social democratic parties that promised economic growth for their nations and members of their constituencies as enthusiastically as they promised greater security and increasing equality.¹⁹

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is easy for us to discern the steady transformation of European labor parties from revolutionary Marxism to varieties of reformist social democracy, a political position far less distant from the left wing of the twentieth-century American Democratic party than were nineteenth-century European socialist parties. Hartz, writing in the wake of right-wing repression at home, confronting a hostile communist presence in Eastern Europe and Asia, and pondering the prospect of anti-colonial revolutions looming elsewhere, could not have anticipated that development. A dozen years after 1989, we should not continue to ignore it.

* * *

For the two decades between the publication of *LTA* and Hartz's resignation from Harvard in 1974, admiration for the book and its author mushroomed. His brilliance as a teacher inspired a generation of undergraduates and graduate students. The oracular quality of Hartz's writing, which elicited awe during a period when European émigrés such as Karl Popper, Eric Auerbach, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and Leo Strauss were producing their masterworks, now seems less convincing. Few historians or political theorists in our hyper-historicist culture of irony adopt a similar tone of voice. Equally unsettling from our perspective is Hartz's breezy implication that notoriously complex thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Marx, Jefferson, Madison, or Lincoln have a unitary meaning. Since Hartz wrote the scholarship on all these thinkers has developed to the point that one-dimensional interpretations seem not only unconvincing but simple-minded. Yet even a half century ago most political theorists and intellectual historians exhibited greater care when characterizing the ideas of complicated thinkers. In short, even when Hartz wrote his bold style stood out, but his dazzling displays of erudition and his equally sparkling prose bought him credibility. These days hanging arguments on personal authority is out of fashion. When we see Hartz offering an epigram or sliding over an inconvenient fact or discrepancy, we want to examine the evidence and reconsider the analysis. His writing asks us to genuflect; we raise an eyebrow instead.

After *LTA*, Hartz devoted himself to defenses and elaborations of his "fragment theory" of comparative cultural development and then, in the final years of his life, to rambling ruminations on the meaning of world history. In an essay published in 1960, Hartz undertook to expand his argument in *LTA* to encompass contemporary debates over democracy. This essay shows his

characteristic imagination and insight, but in the end it merely reframes his argument about American exceptionalism and subordinates the untidy evidence of history to the spare elegance of his analytical scheme.²⁰ As in *LTA*, Hartz presented a deviant American case spinning away from a West European norm. He was now contrasting America against an even more wildly divergent communist world, but the logic of his exceptionalist model remained intact. We should dispense with such conceptions of America—whether exceptionalist or anti-exceptionalist—and adopt the perspective Thomas Haskell has dubbed “postexceptionalist.” The claim “to have discovered in the uniqueness of national experience an explanatory key that unlocks all doors” can prompt exceptionalists to freeze their evidence into the static typologies of the sort that prevented Hartz, even at his best, from dealing with the particularities of different times and different nations.²¹

* * *

Why does Hartz’s analysis of America’s liberal tradition matter now? Why can’t historians simply acknowledge the book’s significance as a product of the 1950s and leave it at that? Hartz’s argument has proved so powerful and so resistant to critics’ charges that its legacy has had serious consequences of two sorts in America since the 1950s.

First, Hartz persuaded political theorists that there is no reason to study American political thought. Because America had no social conflicts, he argued, Americans contributed “relatively little political thought at all.” Given moral consensus, “political philosophy did not have to get going in the first place.”²² American undergraduates and graduate students interested in political theory learn to grapple with the writings of Rousseau or Hegel or Marx, but most of them learn little or nothing about the American intellectual tradition. Hartz himself seems to have focused most of his energies as a teacher on European thinkers, and his profession has followed his lead. Not only is it possible to earn a Ph.D. in first-rate graduate programs of political science without having studied American political thought, relatively few courses in the field exist. Few political scientists consider it worth studying.

At least four distinct reasons can be offered to explain this odd phenomenon. First, political theorists usually concentrate on philosophers in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, who derived their politics from elaborate systems ranging from ontology to metaphysics. The American tradition has produced few such thinkers. Second, the style of linguistic analysis that has dominated Anglo-American philosophy since the middle of the twentieth century has been inhospitable to consideration of the sort of issues discussed by earlier American political theorists. Although recent theorists, following the lead of John Rawls, have returned to such concerns,

most of them have also followed the methodology of the early Rawls, concentrating on thought experiments and eschewing a historical or empirical approach. Third, the discipline of political science continues its curious obsession with what Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro have fittingly termed the "pathologies of rational choice theory," an approach to politics that is antagonistic to the classic concerns of political theory. In the words of William H. Riker, a founding father of rational choice theory (a way of thinking uneasy with the very notion of "founding" because of its historical implications), political scientists should dispense with "traditional methods—i.e., history writing, the description of institutions, and legal analysis," because such work can produce at best only wisdom, not science. Fourth and finally, many of those who teach political theory in American universities are the students (or the students of students) of two influential scholars who agreed on little except the insignificance of American thought, Leo Strauss and Louis Hartz.²³

Hartz's devaluing of American political thought has thus helped justify the failure of American political scientists to take seriously their own intellectual heritage, which may be poor in Aristotles and Hegels but has been rich in debates about what democracy is and what it should be. Ideas have been at the center of American popular political debates since the seventeenth century. Because citizenship in the English North American colonies was relatively widespread from the outset, writers of compacts, covenants, constitutions, laws, and (at least until fairly recently) court decisions in America have sought to communicate with a broad public in terms ordinary people could understand and endorse. For that reason, as Donald S. Lutz has demonstrated, students of American political theory should examine the meanings of public texts rather than limiting their attention to a canon of abstract political philosophy.²⁴ From Plato onward, most of the writers of "great books" of political philosophy either never had to deal with such matters, never had the chance, or, when the opportunity presented itself, came up with schemes quite different from those suggested in their theoretical treatises. Locke, for example, dreamed up a semi-feudal never-never-land in response to his friend Shaftesbury's invitation to write a constitution for the colony of Carolina. Rousseau prescribed for Poland a constitution allowing room for aristocrats, serfs, and forms of representative democracy inimical to the republican forms he envisioned when he dreamed of his native Geneva or unspoiled Corsica.

America's most enduring theorists, by contrast, have been actively involved in the complexities of the political process. For that reason their writings show not only a distinctive engagement with the practical questions of democratic governance but an equally distinctive tensile strength that professors and students of political theory, hurrying to get from Locke and

Rousseau to Mill and Marx and then on to Rawls and Habermas, fail to grasp in their quick readings of *Federalist* Number Ten and Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government*. Hartz's portrait of America's "liberal tradition," by denying the depth and seriousness of the issues addressed by those who have shaped America's political and legal traditions, helped authorize such unfortunate disregard, and the enduring respect of many scholars for *LTA* perpetuates it.²⁵

A second consequence of the widespread acceptance of Hartz's argument has been the tendency to assume that the only authentic, legitimate questions of American politics are those concerning self-interest, individual rights, and the sanctity of personal property. This astonishing assumption is shared across the political spectrum. As John Diggins has pointed out, there is a surprising congruence between Hartz's *LTA* and Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. Both books reduce Americans to a band of single- and simple-minded consumers who lack the personal or cultural resources to see beyond the appeals of corporate and/or mainstream political advertisements. Whereas free-market capitalists and conservative cultural commentators unanimously dismissed Marcuse's diagnosis as simplistic and his prescriptions for reform as proto-totalitarian, they have tended implicitly to endorse Hartz's analysis, perhaps because it led, as he admitted himself (p. 33), only to a shoulder-shrugging acceptance of unthinking individualism and market "imperatives."²⁶

The ready embrace by radical scholars of Hartz's portrait of a one-dimensional American tradition, which depends on ignoring or denying the significance of a continuing series of democratic reform efforts stretching from the seventeenth century to the present, ironically reinforces the assumptions such scholars intend to criticize and transform. For if property-holding alone mattered to Americans in the past and matters in the present, and if frontal (i.e., socialist) challenges to the institution of private property alone can be judged genuinely radical, then perhaps America ought to be defined as nothing more than a culture of consumer capitalism. (So too of course should Germany, France, and Sweden.) That way of thinking seems better suited to the interests of free-marketeers than to those calling for America to become more egalitarian, but a surprising number of leftist scholars in the fields of law, philosophy, political theory, and history have embraced it. Criticizing Hartz thus ruffles feathers across the contemporary political spectrum. Too many people, right and left, have too much invested in the idea of an American liberal tradition to surrender it without a fight.

By diminishing the significance of democratic thinkers, activists, and movements in American history, those who continue to endorse Hartz's notion of a liberal tradition—whether from the right or the left—consciously or unwittingly reinforce the claims of those who define as un-American any conception of radical democracy. Challenging hierarchies, reasoning from the

logic of the principle "one citizen, one vote" to the conclusion that economic power should not extend into social and political power, has been a recurring theme in American history. But such battles never end: disagreement, deliberation, and provisional compromises that in turn generate new disagreements is the ineluctable dynamic of democracy. *LTA* came to prominence just as John Dewey's ideas went into eclipse. Perhaps the recent renaissance of American pragmatism will help to refocus attention on the potential harmonies that Dewey envisioned between our culture's commitments to open-ended scientific inquiry and his ideal of an open-ended, experimental, pluralist democracy. Only when viewed through the backwards telescope of Hartz's liberal tradition do the struggles for a democratic culture that Dewey saw at the heart of American history shrink to insignificance. For the sake of historical accuracy as well as democratic renewal, we should widen our focus as scholars to the projects that Tocqueville identified, the sometimes successful efforts to build a democratic culture on an ethic of reciprocity, efforts blurred beyond recognition by Hartz's distorting lens.

Hartz was worried about America's relevance to a world of nations shaking themselves free from the bonds of colonialism. At the dawn of a new century the United States seems not only relevant but, to the surprise of those Americans accustomed to thinking of their nation as an imperial bully and oppressive capitalist power, even—in certain respects, at least—a model. Developed and developing nations alike are drawn toward our sturdy (if occasionally suspect) democratic political institutions and our (currently vibrant) state-regulated market economy. Since the eighteenth century it has been less the absence of feudalism than the presence of democracy—albeit imperfect and constricted but nevertheless slowly expanding—that has distinguished the United States from other nations, and that difference has shrunk as democracy has spread. It is democracy that now makes America attractive to nations shaking themselves free from bonds of other kinds. During the last fifty years varieties of liberal democratic polities and mixed economies have become the rule rather than the exception in the developed world and prototypes for developing nations eager to enjoy more stable politics and to share the richer nations' prosperity. "Democracy will come into its own," Dewey predicted, "for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman."²⁷

If we know too much now about the stubborn persistence of inequality in America to share entirely Whitman's indomitable optimism, we can at least attempt to recover the vibrant sense of democratic possibility that infused his *Democratic Vistas*, written in the bleak days after the Civil War:

America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism, (as, indeed, the present is but the legitimate

birth of the past, including feudalism,) counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future. Nor is that hope unwarranted. To-day, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, in vistas, a copious, sane, gigantic offspring. For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come. Sole among nationalities, these States have assumed the task to put in forms of lasting power and practicality, on areas of amplitude rivaling the operations of the physical kosmos, the moral political speculations of ages, long, long deferr'd, the democratic republican principle, and the theory of development and perfection by voluntary standards, and self-reliance.²⁸

From the perspective of the year 2001, it is not the sober-minded Hartz but the democratic "seer" Whitman who appears the more reliable guide to and the shrewder analyst of American culture. Those who seek to understand the dynamics of liberal democracy in American history would do well to keep both of their perspectives in view.

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1. For especially helpful recent discussions of Locke's ideas, see Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Thought," *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 497-511; and Dienstag, "Between History and Nature: Social Contract Theory in Locke and the Founders," *The Journal of Politics* 58 (1996): 985-1009.

2. Mowry, review of *LTA*, *The American Historical Review* 61 (1955): 140-141; Mann, review of *LTA*, *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d Ser., 12 (1955): 653-655; Gabriel, review of *LTA*, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17 (1956): 136-138; Meyers, "Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Appraisal*," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963-64): 261-268.

3. Roazen, "Introduction," in Louis Hartz, *The Necessity of Choice: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (1990), 8.

4. Hartz, "Comment," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963-64): 279-284.

5. Krieger, "A View of the Farther Shore," *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 5 (1963-64): 269-273. Hartz had attempted to preempt this criticism in *LTA*, pp. 26-27, by pointing out how little intra-European comparative history had been done. Krieger was not persuaded.

6. Koch, review of *LTA*, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (1955): 550-552.

7. Louis Hartz, "Reply," in *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, ed. John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset (1974; rev. ed., 1984), 357-361.

8. Roazen, "Introduction," in Hartz, *Necessity of Choice*, 20.

9. For evidence of the centrality of race and gender in contemporary scholarship, see for example three of the most widely read and celebrated works of the last several years, Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U. S. History* (1997); Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (1998); and Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (1998).

10. On the paradoxical consequences of this dynamic for our understanding of America's "liberal tradition" as a cultural phenomenon distinct from its Christian origins, see David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (1996), esp. chaps. 2, 3, and 8. Hartz could be an acute analyst of religion and its critics. In *The Necessity of Choice*, chapter two, he examined brilliantly the eighteenth-century French *philosophes'* reliance on a standard of "nature" rather than "science" once they realized that a thoroughgoing empiricism would require them to take seriously the religious experience of French Catholics. Whereas a similar insight drove William James, committed to a radical empiricism, to examine in detail the varieties of religious experience, Hartz, for reasons not altogether clear, chose instead simply to dismiss the political significance of religion in America.

11. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (1990), 245. See more generally David D. Hall, "Narrating Puritanism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry Stout and D. G. Hart (1997), 51–83; and Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (1995). On Niebuhr, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (1985; rev. ed., 1996); and on Murray, Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (1993). For a fuller exposition of my argument concerning the role of religion in American political culture, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Knowledge and Belief in American Public Life," in *The Virtues of Liberalism* (1998), 38–58.

12. Richard J. Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (1993), 151. This spirited book can be read as an extended essay devoted to demonstrating, in considerable detail, the inadequacy of Hartz's argument in *LTA*. Another convincing rebuttal of Hartz's argument is the outstanding book by Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (1987). On the issues of race, ethnicity, and gender, see especially Smith, *Civic Ideals*; and Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies*.

13. John Adams quoted in Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (1993), 136; Samuel Adams quoted in Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969), 407. On the distance separating John Adams in particular from Hartz's notion of a liberal tradition, see the penetrating essay by John P. Diggins, "Knowledge and Sorrow: Louis Hartz's Quarrel with American History," *Political Theory* 16 (1988): 355–376. For recent studies establishing the founders' commitment to democratic procedures and challenging the idea that they should be seen as champions either of atomistic liberalism or of classical republicanism, see especially Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty* (1995); Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (1990); and Robert E. Shalhope, *The Roots of Democracy: American Thought and Culture, 1760–1800* (1990).

14. Cf. Louis Hartz, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776–1860* (1948); and Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin, *Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774–1861* (1947); with William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (1996), esp. 1–18, 84–88, and 284–285. For a wealth of evidence further disputing Hartz's portrait of an uncomplicated, triumphant liberal ethos, presented within an explicitly comparative framework, see the fine essays in James Henretta and Jürgen Heideking, eds., *Republicanism and Liberalism in America and the German States, 1750–1850* (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press).

15. Clark, "The Sacred Rights of the Weak: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 463–493. For other portraits of antebellum American culture irreconcilable with Hartz's, see Thomas L. Haskell's contributions to Thomas J. Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (1992); and Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (1997).

16. The power Hartz exerted as teacher and interpreter is apparent in J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (1993), which employs the analytical framework of *LTA* even though Greenstone's own argument shows its inadequacy.

17. I have tried to make clear the similarities as well as the differences between these American and European theorists and reformers in *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and*

Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920 (1986). More recent interpretations that place progressivism in a transatlantic context are Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998); and Axel R. Schäfer, *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875–1920* (2000). An excellent study of progressive thought that emphasizes its ethical and religious dimensions is Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (1994).

18. On these programs and their fate, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Poverty in America," in *Virtues of Liberalism*, 100–123; and Patrick D. Reagan, *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890–1943* (1999).

19. Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (1984); Andrews and Chapman, eds., *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870–1990* (1995). See also Stein Ringen, *The Possibility of Politics: A Study in the Political Economy of the Welfare State* (1987); and Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (1988).

20. Louis Hartz, "Democracy: Image and Reality," in *Democracy Today*, ed. William N. Chambers and Robert H. Salisbury (1960), 13–29.

21. Thomas L. Haskell, "Taking Exception to Exceptionalism," *Reviews in American History* 28 (2000): 151–166.

22. Louis Hartz, *Necessity of Choice*, 178; see also Roazen's discussion of this issue in the Introduction to that volume: "If, as Hartz believed, philosophizing exists only where there is fundamental social conflict, it is no wonder that American political thought, compared to what happened in Europe, never succeeded in getting off the ground" (p. 5).

23. Green and Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (1994); Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962), viii; *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered*, ed. Jeffrey Friedman (1996), includes voices on all sides of the debate over rational choice. See also Rogers Smith, "Science, Non-Science, and Politics," in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terrence J. McDonald (1996), 119–159.

24. Lutz, *A Preface to American Political Theory* (1992).

25. On the stubborn persistence among political scientists of the idea of an American liberal consensus almost fifty years after Hartz wrote, see the comprehensive survey by Robert Booth Fowler, *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought Since the 1960s* (1999). For a more detailed critique of Hartz's mode of argument and its consequences for the study of American political thought, see James T. Kloppenberg, "From Hartz to Tocqueville: Shifting the Focus from Liberalism to Democracy in America," in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian Zelizer, eds., *Democracy in America* (forthcoming). For shrewd commentary on these issues, see also Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (1968), 444–466.

26. John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941–1960* (1988), 255–256.

27. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), in *The Later Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston et al., vol. 2: 1925–1927 (1984), 350. See also Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), 552.

28. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (1867, 1871), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (1982), 929.