



Review: Hartz on American Liberal Tradition

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HARTZ ON AMERICAN LIBERAL TRADITION

Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1954. Pp. 329. \$4.75.

Mr. Hartz has attempted in the spirited volume on *The Liberal Tradition in America* a survey of the course of political theory during the national period of national history. He seems implicitly to adopt a thesis that F. S. C. Northrop before him made explicit, namely that a particular culture rests on a set of premises and that its history is the narrative of the consequences that follow logically from the premises. Several years ago Northrop insisted that Locke's philosophy stated the premises for American civilization. Northrop went further to point out that Locke's ideas represented a conscious effort on the part of the social philosopher to carry the view of nature of Newtonian physics over into social thinking. Mr. Hartz mentions only Locke. He does not point out that American history began in the seventeenth century, synchronous with the climax of the scientific revolution. As Newton influenced his younger friend Locke, scientific thinking has provided an important part of the background for social and political thinking from the time of Locke to the present.

Mr. Hartz defines "liberalism" in Lockean terms as popular government by a state of limited powers that is controlled ultimately by citizens through the institution of universal suffrage. By this definition Americans are and have been since the Revolution, save for the Federalists and the antebellum defenders of a slave culture in the South, all liberals. Quite naturally Mr. Hartz rejects the definition of liberalism to be found in the works of those "Progressive" historians, Beard and Parrington. Theirs is a liberalism related to a struggle within a capitalist order. Beard, in particular, emphasizes the conflict between classes. Mr. Hartz refers to these two historians again and again as illustrations of that sterile and even misleading analysis of the historical record which results from ignoring one of the most obvious aspects of the American past.

Mr. Hartz insists upon the idea, almost as old as the nation itself, that America is unique. For Mr. Hartz American liberalism, that is the evolution of political theory out of Lockean premises, is unique because American liberals never had to overthrow a long established feudal order as did the militants of the French Revolution. Only the "remnants" of feudalism remained in the colonies in 1776. The liquidation of these required relatively little effort. Mr. Hartz, hewing to the line of his thesis, underplays that combination of wars not only against an overseas enemy but within American communities that goes by the name of the Revolutionary War. The American Revolution has significance for American socialism. The long struggle against feudalism in Europe inevitably brought forth socialism with its emphasis on the class struggle. Mr. Hartz argues that because Americans at the start of their national history had only to liquidate the remnants of feudalism they have never produced a genuinely powerful indigenous socialist movement. The history of American political thought is, then, the story of Lockean liberalism moving through the decades without serious opposition from either the feudal right or the socialist left.

There were two conspicuous American variants. Southern theorists replied to the attacks of the anti-slavery men of the North with an effort to fix a permanent class hierarchy in Southern culture. The Federalists of the turn of the nineteenth century, looking upon themselves as an aristocracy, and fearing what they chose to call the "mob," took an anti-democratic position and opposed universal manhood suffrage. The thought of the Federalists was conditioned by the fact that they had no genuine aristocracy to oppose. Mr. Hartz, using an English analogy, has called their point of view and system of ideas Whiggery. American Whiggery in the second decade of the nineteenth century declined to political impotence. Then, after universal manhood suffrage had been achieved, Whiggery, beginning in the "log cabin and hard cider" campaign of Harrison in 1840, made peace with liberalism. After 1865 Whiggery, freed from the contest with Southern agrarianism, achieved a strategic triumph by making Horatio Alger the great American symbol. Alger represented the "American way." The Alger ethos sublimated into "Americanism" thwarted, as the twentieth century opened, any important infiltration of Marxism. The Hartz position leads to the conclusion that outside of slavery no basic issue has divided American political thought since the fall of the Federalists. Mr. Hartz speaks again and again of the "moral unity" of America. In this unity may be found the seed of that evil plant, conformism.

Mr. Hartz's interpretation has value but his essay must be used with care. He has a thesis to prove and, as a consequence, his history sometimes has the quality of that which Disney used to support his version of the saga of Davy Crockett. It is too simple to interpret American history wholly in terms of Locke. Mr. Hartz virtually ignores Rousseau whom Irving Babbitt and later Walter Lippmann looked upon as the evil genius of American democracy. In fact, Lippmann has interpreted the history of our democracy in terms of Rousseau and has arrived at conclusions quite different from those of Mr. Hartz. The omission of Rousseau suggests that Mr. Hartz has failed to take full account of the European tradition that provides the background for American political thinking. Neither science nor Christianity enter importantly into his analysis. Yet both contributed much to the intellectual climate in which popular government in America was carried on.

Mr. Hartz's thesis has greatest relevance to the Federalist period and gives the decline of the Federalists a new illumination. But the seeming assertion that Hamilton set up the Federal judiciary as a substitute aristocracy must be taken with reserve. The affirmation fits neatly into Mr. Hartz's thesis but the story of the evolution of judicial review and of the emergence of the Supreme Court is more complicated than the present book implies.

Mr. Hartz's discussion of the democratization of "Whiggery" through its acceptance of universal manhood suffrage and of the "cosmos of Horatio Alger" is one of the best parts of the book. His conclusion that the open class system in America thwarted the hopes of the early twentieth-century socialists is sound. Mr. Hartz is correct when he says that this open class system when combined with popular government became that "Ameri-

canism" that proved to be the fatal adversary of Marxism. He has a useful discussion of the use of "Americanism" as a weapon in the hands of "Whiggery" for the achievement of specific ends. His emphasis on the inherent trend toward conformism in American Lockeanism is particularly illuminating.

A prime defect of the book is its failure to analyze the Lockean tradition in detail. Mr. Hartz is too often rhetorical and vague. His statements frequently lack precision. This aspect of the book becomes more evident when Mr. Hartz attempts to apply his thesis to twentieth-century America, particularly after World War I. The mid-twentieth century has been a period of remarkable achievement in social thought that has relevance directly or indirectly for political theory. Sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists have combined in a long and fruitful study of the relation of the individual to his culture or society. Locke's simple social atomism has been profoundly altered. Mr. Hartz makes no use of this new body of knowledge and theory that sets off the twentieth century from the nineteenth. The omission is the more surprising in the matter of anthropology because of Mr. Hartz's insistence on the comparative approach in his discussion of political theory in the United States. The anthropologists have been using the comparative method for more than half a century. Mr. Hartz's effort to hold fast to his Lockean thesis to the end of his story has caused him to ignore developments of great significance. There is more than Locke in American political theory. Political theory does not exist in a vacuum. At the end of the book Mr. Hartz speaks of the world in the mid-twentieth century as crashing in upon and destroying the traditional isolation of America. "What is at stake is nothing less than a new level of consciousness, a transcending of irrational Lockeanism, in which understanding of self and understanding of others go hand in hand." What Mr. Hartz fails to observe is that the work of achieving such understandings and such a transcendence has been under way now for several decades and that the results give sound cause for hope.

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