

Louis Hartz and the Liberal Tradition: From Consensus to Crack-Up

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THE VIEW THAT LIBERALISM is the self-evident dominant ideology of democratic capitalism has been repeated frequently by many different social scientists and historians. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., declared this to be as a matter of American policy at the close of the 1940s in *The Vital Center*,¹ and it was declared to be an empirical reality in American history by Louis Hartz (1919-1986) in the early 1950s in *The Liberal Tradition in America*.² Indeed, this proposition was so much an article of political faith that it became, from a variety of vantage points, something of a mantra in normative circles. Even those in bitter opposition to liberalism accepted as a given its hegemonic status. From Russell Kirk (1918-1994) on the right to C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) on the left inadvertent tribute was granted to the unique status of liberalism in America at mid-twentieth century.

Before engaging in the academic pastime of after-the-fact critiques, or attempting to update or to revise the tenuous situation of liberalism at mid-decade of the twenty-first century, it might be valuable to summarize the view of liberalism as the dominant ideological thread in

American history. Professor Hartz's essential view is that the tradition that comes down to us from John Locke is one that respects individual property rights while at the same time honors the sanctity of the social contract, and everybody's inalienable right to participate in it. He further argues (and this is perhaps the source of the debate) that liberal democracy is essentially the only political tradition that the United States had ever known. The view of America as the "First New Nation," unencumbered by the feudal inheritance of Europe, was given substantial reinforcement and sociological support by Seymour Martin Lipset in his own outstanding work by that name. While Hartz never quite denies the prospects of any other ideological vision for America, it is fair enough to say that he postulated the idea of a liberal consensus, one that has served to unify and to purify the American imagination first through the revolutionary process, then through a Civil War, and finally, through two twentieth-century world wars fought on the basis of liberal persuasions and risks to their continuation.

It was Hartz's misfortune that at the very time he was announcing a liberal consensus, the crack-up of that long tradition was well underway. However, it should not be thought that the Hartzian position somehow went unchallenged

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until the founding of *National Review* by William F. Buckley in the same year as Hartz's book appeared in 1955. But Buckley, like Russell Kirk and other conservative thinkers, did not so much deny the significance of liberalism, as regrettably and even wistfully assert the Hartz thesis, as argue the need to topple and to replace its dominance with an eighteenth-century vision of an American nation in which civic values and personal virtues, rather than collective interest groups, would once again reign supreme.

Opposition to the notion of a liberal consensus (even if not by name) has a long history. Indeed, one might argue that *The Federalist Papers* of Madison, Jay, and Hamilton marked the opening salvo in the effort to reconfigure an American nation in terms of a conservative consensus. But I think it is fair to say that Hartz's love affair with the nineteenth century, summarized in his own volume on the subject, rested in large measure on the huge shift in both Europe and America from an aristocratic tradition to a democratic one, from a rural economy to an industrial society, and from an elitist to a mass vision that rested on the emergence of the political party system, trade unions, and voluntary associations outside and beyond the church system.³ I find it hard to argue with a premise that sees liberalism as the dominant ideology of the nineteenth century in North America and in Western Europe. But this is due to the fact that the ideological underpinnings in both areas were derived from a shared British and, to a lesser degree, French sense of Enlightenment.

It is when America moved into the twentieth century that this first stage of the liberal ideology suffered large-scale setbacks. Its cracks became manifest—something that Hartz was reticent to acknowledge. Illustrative of this new undercurrent of discontent with the liberal consensus were the remarks of the first president of the American Political Science

Association. In a work even older than his presidential address at the APSA's first of one hundred presidential addresses, Frank Goodnow in *Politics and Administration*, served a warning on the proposition that liberalism is or could ever be the sole source of popular government. He argued the case for the force of the people to be exercised through the will of the State. Indeed, he felt that the civic administrative apparatus, which was starting to expand rapidly at the start of the twentieth century, far from serving all people, was seriously flawed. Goodnow argued that what was needed in America was a political system in which the party and party leadership had become strong enough to combat the rising tide of civil service.⁴ This home-grown "common sense" vision of the Hegelian premises of *The Philosophy of Right and Law* was thus part and parcel of vanguard thinking in the APSA, and I daresay of educated public opinion fearful of the democratic implications of advancement through education, expertise, and policy-making without politics.

My effort in this paper is to explore the contradictions of liberalism over time, that is, between nineteenth- and twentieth-century varieties, and then try to puzzle out what the fate of liberalism will be in the twenty-first century. Admittedly, this is a catbird view of a complex set of issues that have occupied some of the best minds in the political and the social studies area. If much of what follows has an ex cathedra sensibility, the type of second-guessing that I find unpleasant as well as unproductive, I request forgiveness. Indeed, my views on the subject were earlier presented in *Ideology and Utopia in the United States, 1776-1976*. In that compendium was my paper on "The New Conservatism," which appeared one year after Hartz's classic in 1956. In that essay, I argued that a fundamental shift had already occurred in America, one that not only admitted of a conservative ideology, but an ideology with a working-

class social base in the West and in regions of the country that easily escaped the notice of scholars like Hartz working from the comfort of Harvard University.⁵

That proposition fell like a lead balloon on those who advocated the idea of a liberal consensus. In retrospect these scholars were more intent on preserving a simplified vision of American culture than in coming to grips with fissures and pressures within American life. They placed far greater emphasis on a hoped-for consensus, than upon an analysis of conflict in America. Noticeably absent was a sense of the critical importance of racial tensions, gender inequities, religious values, ethnic differences, and cultural changes of seismic proportions. There was more interest in confirming rather than in confronting a world in which the splendid isolation of the nineteenth century came to a sharp and decisive end. In 1898, with benevolent annexationist activities extending from Cuba to the Philippines, the twentieth century began. Max Lerner's encyclopedic summary of the liberal consensual tradition that followed was embodied in his impressive and well-received work on *America as a Civilization* (1963). It served to summarize a shift from a benevolent to a muscular national democratic ideology.

The ground for theoretical shifts already appeared in the worldly activities of America at the start of the twentieth century. But the advantages of maintaining the idea of an American ideology were so great as to make the opposition appear as regressive fuddy-duddies, and place on hold a more realistic assessment of the processes of evolution in American political thought. As one recent book, *The Search for American Political Development*, by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, bluntly put matters, "Hartz argued that Americans were singularly limited in their ability to conceive of anything better or, for that matter, to conceive of anything else at all."⁶ And in his

own earlier critique of the liberal consensus hypothesis, Rogers Smith argued that the dam had burst. "The dynamics of American development cannot simply be seen as a rising tide of liberalizing forces progressively submerging contrary beliefs and practices. The national course has been more serpentine."⁷

After two major international wars, all fought on liberalist premises of making the world safe for democracy, and ridding it of tyrants, it became not only feasible but also inevitable for a new generation of thinkers such as William Buckley, Peter Viereck, James Burnham, Russell Kirk, and a host of other figures now legion or legend, to open up for serious discussion everything that liberalism took for granted, not least its claims to unchallenged supremacy in the post-1945 world. The conservative counter-attack acknowledged that ours was a world in which fascism and Nazism were defeated, but insisted that communism and other varieties of totalitarianism remained very much alive and well. In such a world, the notion of a liberal ideological consensus or worse, the end of ideology, was viewed as little more than the hubris that was perpetuated by a New England elite fearful of its academic privileges, not the wisdom of the ages. Yes, there was a John Locke, but so too there was an Edmund Burke. The world of conservatism had its own ghostly heroes—from Walter Lippmann and Arthur Krock in journalism to W. H. Mallock and Whittaker Chambers in what might best be described as popular political philosophy.

Under such circumstances, and looking at the world from the present post-ideological conflict stage, it might be best to examine liberalism as a bourgeois democratic ideology that sought to respond to the twin challenges of socialism and conservatism in the nineteenth-century, and to the still more severe challenges of communism and fascism in the twentieth century. And to be fair, this was a highly

successful frame of mind, one that underwrote a wide number of innovative and reform policies. The challenge to liberalism in the twenty-first century is somewhat more complex. It is the need to protect state sovereignty and at the same time preserve individual, or Lockean rights. It is simply too glib any longer to speak of liberalism as a dominant ideology. It makes its believers lazy and its opponents surly. To think otherwise, to suppress the struggles being fought out among contending forces, such as the political parties, the economic pressure groups, the administrative elites, is to weaken the bite of liberalism, to make it hostage to some set of abstract series of remarks in general normative theory. This presumed consensus would not be serviceable at the present.

Indeed, recent survey research confirms the liberal crack-up—at least as a dominant national ideology. In a three panel survey conducted in 2004 by AARP-Roper ASW, covering an even number of the GI Generation (ages 70 and over), the Silent Generation (ages 58-69), and the Baby Boom Generation (ages 40-57), there is a striking lack of identification with liberal economic causes. All three generations call themselves very or moderately liberal at between 16-20 percent. And the baby boomers, often seen as radical, actually describe themselves as conservative at a 51 per cent level—only eight percentages less than those over 70 years of age. And while it is the case that the boomers support abortion rights, government intervention to protect the environment, health services, and educating the young, the range—from 59 percent for the younger cohort to 48 percent for the oldest cohort—speaks more to polarization on the social agenda items, but not anywhere near the sort of consensus that would provide a bonding effect for liberalism as an ideology or a policy.⁸

My own view is that liberalism derives

its essential power as a fighting creed rather than an agreed-upon quiescent consensus. It reached its peak as the muscular ideological force that gave purpose as well as backbone to both a rising bourgeoisie and a mature one as well. No better example of this exists than the 1912 volume by the nearly forgotten Walter E. Weyl, who in his work on *The New Democracy* could write, in words that are not exactly removed from present-day rhetoric, that “America today is in a somber, soul-questioning mood. We are in a period of clamor, of bewilderment, of an almost tremulous unrest. We are hastily revising all our social conceptions. We are hastily testing all our political ideals. We are profoundly disenchanted with the fruits of a century of independence.” Weyl leaves no doubt that as to the national sources of such “shrill political cries,” the radicals who speak of sensational inequalities of wealth “with an exaggeration which is as symptomatic as are the evils it describes,” and “conservative men with a statistical bent,” warrant that “American democracy is in process of decay.” Under the circumstances, liberalism almost by default became the home for those who felt that such charges were wide of the mark. It was left to liberalism to turn the disenchantment with American life into “positives.”⁹

For one-hundred years, liberalism became not so much the ideological consensus as the operational codebook of middle-class strivings rather than ruling-class presumptions in America. The liberal perspective defined a universe in which political economy signifies precisely the uneasy confluence of features that ground a society on laws being above men, on civility serving as mediating influence on interests, and on unrestrained faith in popular participation rather than aristocratic or dictatorial forms of governing. It was and remains suspicious of top-down bureaucratic impositions, and also of bottom-up mindless rule through

street manifestations.

Liberalism throughout much of the nineteenth century was strongly identified with freedom from traditional norms on the right and statist controls on the left. There is an entire panoply of beliefs that identifies liberalism with individual forms of free reign in decision-making. Clearly, this vision of the world corresponded with controls on the ground of a bourgeoisie addicted to the Darwinian ideal of struggle that places the individual at the center of the social order. Tradition, convention, and all forms of constricting behavior were viewed as part of a medieval past. While with one eye it trained its sights on the conservative ethic of responsibility and self-reliance, liberalism increasingly trained its sights on socialism, the idea of progress, novelty, and molding individuals into social beings who care for others, and for whom welfare transcended the ethic of workfare. Liberalism became a forum against a retreat to the past, which was onerous, and an avoidance of the future, which was only slightly less unknown because it was untried. As a result, liberal views may have been a powerful ideology precisely because they seemed porous, spongy, so intent on democratic ends.

One could say that this view sufficed from British Chartism in 1832 to the Wilsonian presidential credo that preceded the First World War. What changed is less the content of the double face of liberalism, than the more potent foes it had to face in most of the twentieth century, especially the period that lasted from 1914-1989: communism and fascism. As Walter Lippmann¹⁰ in the 1930s and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.,¹¹ after World War Two in the 1940s, almost uniquely understood, liberalism was faced with a tremendous problem: how a democratic state would cope with a more powerful and ruthless pair of adversaries in fascism and communism, and yet retain the attention and the belief of its adherents in the demo-

cratic west. This task was made difficult because liberalism, like its adversaries, Nazism and Communism, was also rooted in an essentially secular, enlightenment tradition, but unlike its opponents, stayed clear of chiliastic and teleological codes disguised as history and sociology. It managed this transvaluation of values in brilliant if at times unconscious shifts in strategies. With the support of the New Deal and with the victory in the Second World War, liberalism shifted gears into neo-liberalism. It developed from a (roughly) 1900-1950 approach, which rested upon everyman at the same starting gates, to a (roughly) 1950-2000 approach, which advocated support for all citizens to end up at the same time at the finishing line.

This racetrack metaphor became the key to survival: the old liberalism assumed that individuals required a common starting place to such betterment and advancement. All human beings would be at the starting gate together: black and white, male and female, believers and non-believers, and given a level playing field, the more highly qualified would emerge over time to assume the reins of government and direction of the economy. The problem quickly apparent in this model is that the field of play is rarely level: there are prejudices, animosities, biological differences in capabilities, cultural distinctions in temperament, etc. The rise of data-gathering and data-mongering made every newspaper reader aware of differences and disparities, and suspicious of ideas and identities. Hence, liberalism could no longer turn a blind Spencerian eye toward differences in stratification. In short, neo-liberalism attempted with great success to fuse the romantic individualism of the nineteenth century with the mechanistic collectivism of the twentieth century.

In such a context, neo-liberalism soon developed its own momentum in a post-Hartian universe. It was a strategy that

differed markedly from classical liberalism. It came to identify itself with a uniform set of outcomes, defined and determined by differential weights for different people, again, much like a horse in handicap races. Artifacts to impede their speed would weigh down good horses, while slower horses would escape such an outcome, and indeed be given incentives precisely because they are slower out of the gate. Programs ranging from affirmative action to anti-discriminating resolutions were aimed to make certain that “no child is left behind”—and no adult either. The new liberalism became a rallying cry for the long-range goals of communism and fascism, but without the short-range instruments of terrorist implementation. The success of such a strategy, whether pre-determined or designed, is scarcely a matter of debate.

As in all such colossal victories, it came at the cost of a crisis within liberalism, one that involved personnel as well as programs. The recognition of an empirical basis for inequality, a measurable series of variables that defined social stratification as hierarchical, led to a moral search by liberalism for a set of policies aimed at eradicating such inequality. The new liberalism thus took its cue from the totalitarian claims inherited from the Enlightenment: that every vestige of inequality was social and not biological in character, and hence that it could be rooted out, extirpated, through good social and economic policies. And in truth, liberalism of the new variety has many credits chalked up: personal security from cradle to grave became a universal aim of western cultures. And wedded as were these goals to an accelerated system of social mobility through education, the formula seemed to deliver on the promise of the democratic west: democratic methods force-fed by egalitarian results.

Where the formula broke down was only in evidence when the social goals were up against the economic and psy-

chological consequences of the new liberalism as a form of redistribution of wealth, pleasure, and culture. Without repeating well-worn observations, it soon became apparent that there is in any society a tipping point when redistribution leads to a disinclination to work, to create, or to invent. Consequently, the new liberalism, which depends heavily on a continuing flow of growth in the economy, came upon the hard fact of stagnation and an inability to create the forms of wealth needed to sustain high growth. The egalitarian model also sabotaged the idea of difference as such, of unique qualities, differential capabilities, biologically rooted differences between genders, ethnic groups, and, yes, races. The very articulation of difference became suspect—a way of smuggling in a conservative or reactionary set of premises that negated liberalism as an ideology. About the only area permitted to express its position in socio-biological terms was homosexuality, since the claim that it was rooted in the nature of the person served as a unique justification for its practice.

As a child of the Enlightenment, liberalism could hardly escape the cultural struggles of modernity itself. The assault on religions, theologies, and beliefs in God were equated with venomous superstition, with institutionalized forms of repression of science, and finally with deciding who should live and who should die—as was the case in the Holocaust, when Jews were singled out from other religions *by* other religions. The role of Church hierarchies, so hotly and bitterly debated, enters the category of the new liberalism only as a belief that the eradication of the supernatural itself was a necessary element in the naturalization of the world. Secularization of the world became a rallying cry of humanism without god and liberalism without faith. The difficulty with this new liberalism is that the greatest crimes of the twentieth century were committed by those who pro-

fessed being humanists, or at least non-believers. One was faced with the spectacle of fascists and communists arguing the philosophical premises of the very enlightenment that was supposed to set western man free. The strength of liberalism was sapped less by its own limited cultural vision as by the unlimited designs of the totalitarian regimes to which it stood in opposition. Human liberation as totalitarian domination became the conundrum the new liberalism could not resolve.

Liberalism has for two centuries served different masters: as a theory it aims its shafts against tyrannies ancient, medieval and modern. But as a culture it aims to broaden a marketplace—free of official doctrine, even of democratic doctrine. In other words, it has an ambiguous relationship to State power. It wishes to curb such powers as they inhibit the performance of individuals who deviate from social and political norms, but it also wants to harness the economic clout of centralized authority to make sure that certain norms such as unbridled private competition are themselves curbed. Increasingly, it is the force of economic clout that has come to define what the state can do. Liberalism sees itself in the forefront of social welfare, health benefits, housing redistribution, job equity through racial profiling, etc. Limiting State intervention becomes an eminent domain of its conservative opponents.

By the close of the twentieth century, the new liberalism as an ideology drew closer to what might be called third-stream socialism, or welfare socialism. It seemed an ideal way to resolve the dilemma of activist policy without recourse to totalitarian advocacy. As a result, with the collapse of communism and secular authoritarian modalities, the old dichotomization of ideology between conservatism and liberalism was re-established. Radical politics tended to drift off into the margins, at least in secular societies,

while religious politics were seen as outside and beyond the scope of Western culture as such. Liberalism thus becomes the broad-based Left rather than the Vital Center. It becomes a crucial element in the cultural polarization of the West.

The growing interchangeability of terms like liberalism and socialism became the common coin of the discursive realm for a conservative counterattack. Whether reaction and religion were linked in liberalist rhetoric as touchstones of conservatism, what in fact took place was a resilient capacity to distinguish going slowly forward from marching rapidly backward. Whatever the specifics of the debate, it has become clear that the liberal idea is no longer dominant the way Louis Hartz celebrated, and C. Wright Mills on the Left decried. Rather it is this singular polarity that organizes demands for maximizing equity. By the same token, conservatism of the sort outlined by Russell Kirk¹² becomes the umbrella ideology of an Anglo-American tradition forged *against* the Franco-American utilitarian tradition that organizes itself on the presumed Right in support of the idea of liberty. Clearly, value issues change very slowly if at all over time. Tactical and strategic issues change rapidly. To avoid confusion between the two is perhaps the best starting and ending point for a discussion on liberalism and its destiny in the twenty-first century.

The contours of twenty-first century neo-liberalism have already begun to take shape. Again, it is the inner contradictions of liberalism that provide a clue as to where exactly this ideology, fashioned in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is going. On the one hand, there is the firm advocacy of multiculturalism and relativism in value systems. On the other hand, there is the emergence of non-absorptive political theologies such as Moslem fundamentalist doctrines that are dead-set in their opposition to a wide variety of liberal credos. Liberalism is

further pushed to the brink by strains within advanced cultures: to a divide between those for whom opportunity is key—the multiculturalists—and those for whom equity remains the touchstone of a liberal society. Thus, whether it is dual linguistic systems in nations or personal habits of dress in schools, or what is permissible in photo-identification regimens, the problem remains the range of tolerance for individual differences versus the need for standards to assure equity in performance and in outcome. Perhaps Robert Kagan provides the closest thing to an appropriate generalization of liberalism in the twenty-first century. He views its current status as one torn between two opposing aspirations respecting state sovereignty and protecting individual rights. Indeed, for those who look deeply into the history of liberalism, this inner contradiction has been in existence throughout its history. The new element is how liberalism can handle the assaults on state sovereignty and on individual rights that stem from the globalization of politics as such.

What seems certain is that liberalism, by virtue of its eclectic character, does not so much dissolve as find itself confronting new forms of opposition to the open society that test its preeminent force on the world stage. Liberalism from the top down will usually try to insure outcomes that are similar for people, whereas liberalism that rests on bottom-up premises will aim to unleash democratic values. As a result, the force of history and of past limitations compels neo-liberalism to pit the values of pluralism or multiculturalism over and against social egalitarianism. In short, liberalism will not disappear, but it will continue to exhibit the sort of contradictions that have plagued its historic struggle against its more sure-footed, but heavy-handed, adversaries to the Right and to the Left for the past one hundred years. It is in the nature of strong ideologies based upon

long-standing values, rather than limited truths based on science and culture, to challenge the existing order of things. But the limitations of liberalism work to its advantage in well-defined democracies—a property of modest goals that is only now coming to be appreciated.

Liberalism, old and new, is bonded by a critical view of the long history of exploitation and arrogance that is linked to established clerical and secular agencies of rule alike. But as Kagan has shrewdly pointed out, it has been less prepared to view with equal candor the somewhat shorter history of exploitation and arrogance linked to state-instituted social and economic regulatory agencies aimed at human betterment.¹³ Opposition to the liquidation of human beings in the name of tradition or of humanism does not entitle neo-liberalism to a special place of honor. Quite the contrary, it burdens such a position with the heavy task of locating mechanisms for avoiding past mistakes and heavy-handed extremes that talk of democracy but can only deliver mindless, top-down varieties of tyranny. This should prove more difficult with liberalism functioning as a minority position under fire from rightist and leftist sources alike.

Stripped of its theological presumptions, I am inclined to the view of George Weigel, who in the spirit of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) writes that "history is driven, over the long haul, by culture—by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good, and by expressions they give to those convictions in language, literature and the arts; by what individuals and societies are willing to stake their lives on."¹⁴ Such a flinty vision of history is one that needs to be appreciated by political analysts of all persuasions. Those who stand in opposition to liberalism, religionists and secularists alike, will challenge its partial and at times fragmented vision of the polity.

But wisdom determines that after the fallout, categories of ideological dimension, such as conservative, liberal, and radical, are now filtered through normative theory, no less than practical politics or national history. There is a certain comfort to be taken in believing that the struggle to define the world, at least the

United States, has moved beyond ideology into culture as such. That the outcome of this struggle remains uncertain, because it has moved to the realm of human decision rather than historical inevitability, is perhaps itself a sign of maturity and decency in the West.

[Author's Note: This article is based on a lecture entitled "The Future of Liberalism" delivered before the 100th annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, held in Chicago, Illinois, September 3, 2004.]

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