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Still Louis Hartz after All These Years: A Defense of the Liberal Society Thesis

Philip Abbott

Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* was the dominant interpretative text in American political thought for a generation. In the late 1960s the Hartzian hegemony came under severe attack, and by the 1990s his interpretive framework had been declared obsolete. Critiques allege two basic, related flaws: (1) Hartz's interpretation ignored the diversity in American political thought, particularly, though not exclusively, on questions of race, and (2) his analysis exaggerated the extent of the consensus in American political culture. These critiques are based almost exclusively on Hartz's analysis of selected periods of early American political development. I argue that Hartz's basic concepts are powerful analytical tools that continue to provide the most compelling analysis of recent American political development. I test the Hartz thesis by constructing a plausible interpretation of the 1960s based on the concepts employed in *The Liberal Tradition*.

Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (henceforth *LT*) was the dominant interpretative text in American political thought for a generation. Hartz's analysis influenced nearly every aspect of the study of American politics and informed approaches to comparative and international politics as well.¹ Not only were classics of American political science informed by *LT*,² but also more recent approaches to the cultural bases of national identities borrow from Hartz's framework.³ His novel classification of political systems that arrayed "fragment cultures" produced by European imperialism anticipated the themes of postcolonial studies.⁴ Nevertheless, the hegemony of *LT* came under severe attack in the late 1960s, and by the 1990s it was "pretty much dead."⁵ Hartz has become an "untrustworthy narrator," whose conclusions could not be relied on.⁶

These critiques, which I review in more detail below, allege two basic, related flaws: (1) Hartz's interpretation ignored the diversity in American political thought, particularly, though not exclusively, on questions of race, and (2) his analysis exaggerated the extent of the consensus in American political culture. In other words, Hartz missed

huge chunks of American political thought and saw others that simply were not there. This view was based almost exclusively on Hartz's analysis of selected periods of American history, especially the Revolution, the founding, and the Civil War. Critics suggested that *LT*, owing to its analytical failings in these areas, could not adequately interpret subsequent changes and events. *LT* was thus viewed as a theoretically unusable guide to events in the 1960s and beyond.

I argue that, however contested Hartz's readings of any particular period, his basic concepts are powerful analytical tools, which continue to provide the most compelling analysis of recent American political development.

Missing and Imagined Parts

According to many critics, Hartz failed to consider the following aspects of American political culture: republicanism, racism, African American political discourse, feminism, Calvinism, socialism, and feudalism. The last two elements, of course, were explicitly rejected by Hartz, and even early readers have voiced skepticism about their exclusion.

Early critics were particularly suspicious of Hartz's methodology. J. H. Powell complained that Hartz's account seemed to be based upon an a priori theory. If for Hartz, "historical facts have little to do with a theoretic analysis, worse luck," since "the facts of American history get brisk, casual treatment." Powell claimed that the best way to evaluate *LT* was to compare it to any other set of beliefs, since Hartz had not presented historical evidence, but rather an "academic fable."⁷ For Adrienne Koch, Hartz employed a "perverse historical method":

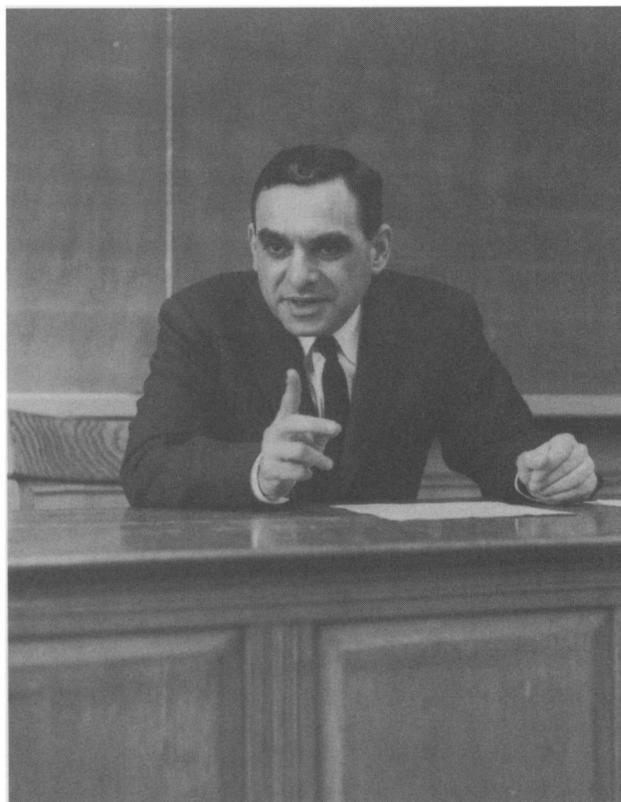
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It is a method that produces no substantial documentation or analysis, but proceeds rather to pick up one name after another and freeze its arbitrarily selected essence to support the author's historical intuition. Individuality, chance, and the complex specific coloration of a thinker's thought is "explained" by the absence of the feudal experience; if the name is European, the thought is "explained" by the presence of a feudal situation. The end result of this "comparative method" which the author recommends as a means to make history "scientific," is to repeat and reaffirm what he is obligated to establish in the first place.⁸

Likewise, Stuart Gerry Brown complained about Hartz's "passionate fondness for isms, both foreign and domestic, as well as occasional fresh mintings of his own." Terms "such as 'feudalism,' 'feudal socialism,' 'socialist feudalism,' 'conservatism,' 'social conservatism,' 'liberal conservatism,' 'conservative liberalism,' etc. etc. gush through his pages in an unceasing torrent until the reading becomes a nightmare."⁹ This absence of specific definitions (both liberalism and feudalism were seen as standing primarily alone as signifiers) and cryptic allusions led critics to conclude that there were really no causal relationships at all once the reader deciphered the text. For example, Eric McKittrick asked why the Federalist Party should be compared to the Whigs when they are separated by a generation ("which in American politics means virtually everything; it may as well be a century"), and there is "only one thing that gave them the least resemblance to each other—each was on the losing side of a political contest in which the other party was getting more votes."¹⁰ It was, according to McKittrick, simply these second-place finishes that give the air of failure, not the misapplication of English Whig political tactics and strategy.

Nearly twenty years later, Kenneth McNaught reiterated this criticism in his analysis of Hartz's treatment of American socialism. McNaught questioned the themes of inevitability. For him, the parts of the narrative "did not add up to the whole and even many of the parts are not historically valid at all."¹¹ McNaught was "very tempted" to conclude that Hartz decided first to prove American liberal uniqueness and had "then gone abroad in search only of differences and has blinded himself to similarities." It could even be argued, he said, that Hartz was actually seeking the lawmaking results of the quantitative method without actually using that method.¹²

More recently, Karen Orren, too, suggested that feudal structures did exist, despite Hartz's claim, and that they persisted in employment relationships well into the nineteenth century. She blamed the influence of *LT* for historians' general lack of acknowledgment of feudal structures. Hartz had adopted a "big bang" theory of American political development that assumed that "interests and institutions present at the creation" were "propelled into a world they would govern thenceforth."¹³ Even theorists who saw themselves as radicals and declared the "end of liberalism" were still under the sway of the big bang theory.



Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives

While Hartz acknowledged the putative existence of socialism and feudalism in the minds of both political actors and historians, he, according to critics, failed to grasp ideologies that both leaned upon and competed with liberalism. Hartz explained the proclivity toward moderation of opinions in American politics as a result of John Locke's influence. In this view, Locke's devotion to private property, combined with the prevalence of land in America, gave an historical reality to the state of nature fiction that made a Reign of Terror impossible and moderated revolution's inevitable Thermidor. Thus the apparent pre- and post-Revolutionary political conflicts were fictional ones, in which participants incorrectly transposed their conceptions of radical change in Europe upon America. Daniel Shays was no Robespierre (nor was Jefferson a late blooming one), and the Constitutional Convention was no Thermidor. But critics argued that this narrative missed an entire, indeed dominant, strand of political thought. Republicanism, with its desire for instituting a *res publica* and its obsession with corruption, competed with the liberal idea. The fears of participants in eighteenth-century politics were real.¹⁴ Though republican critics acknowledged that this ideology was defeated in 1787 (or 1800 or 1825), Hartz "exaggerates his case by reading the phenomenon [of liberalism] backward through the whole of American history" and thus brings his whole narrative into question.¹⁵

The same pattern of discovery of alternate discourses in *LT* has appeared with regard to race. The most extensive treatment of race in *LT* is coterminous with what is probably Hartz's most theoretically innovative argument. For Hartz, Southern defenses of slavery were ignored by the North because they required arguments well beyond the liberal tradition. Hartz concluded that "if a racial theory tried to save whites from the attack on Locke, an inescapable reality kept pulling them into its orbit, since their common humanity with the Negro could not easily be denied."¹⁶ If the Negro was not a man, why attack Locke, and if the Negro was chattel, why bother to attack Jefferson? Hartz concludes that the "political thought of the Civil War symbolizes not the weakness of the American liberal idea but its strength, its vitality, and its utter domination over the American mind."¹⁷ Why, though, asks Rogers Smith, if the Southern defense was so weak as to rest only in the realm of "fantasy" in the mind of the white Southerner, was a bloody and costly Civil War necessary to defeat the South? And why, asks Smith, was Reconstruction such a failure, as Hartz himself admitted?¹⁸

Judith Shklar raised similar questions when she offered her own definition of American exceptionalism. Why, if racial arguments are so fantastical in a Lockean environment, was America the only example of a democracy with an indigenous slave-owning class? And why, for that matter, did the realist sensibilities of the allegedly marginal George Fitzhugh on the inevitability of the strong ruling over the weak become so predominant in post-Civil War America in the form of social Darwinism?¹⁹

Smith's and Shklar's queries (although they reached different assessments on the influence of Fitzhugh) led them, as well as others, to discover discourses of political thought unacknowledged in Hartz's analysis. Like Orren, Smith is suspicious of critics whose focus tends to replicate Hartz's narrative even as they attack it. Since Marxist critics accept Hartz's own fundamental distinction between liberalism and socialism, their complaints center upon the relative marginality of the left in America or the reasons for its absence.²⁰ For Smith, however, ascriptive political thought, of which racism is the most prominent and important type, has always competed with the liberal narrative Hartz outlined. Hartz almost completely ignored ascriptive arguments by focusing upon Fitzhugh: "Thus by centering his discussion of blacks and race on a writer often seen as exceptional in his treatment of those issues (as Hartz admitted), Hartz, illegitimately deprecated the place of overtly racist and nativist ideologies in America." If American political culture consists of powerful ascriptive ideologies that compete and interact with liberalism, then, according to Smith, Hartz's narrative is about white men only. As such, and only as such, his argument about American political development might work "quite well" as a theory. Once, however, one recognizes that "virtually every political actor from the founding to the Progressive era offered

political visions that intertwined liberal themes with ascriptive notions of identity and status," then Hartz's narrative is not simply incomplete but also a text of undeserved national celebration.²¹ *LT* "powerfully reinforced beliefs that the United States' core values" were "pervasively liberal democratic" at a time when the nation was still denying full access on racial, ethnic, and gender grounds.

Shklar rejects the indictment that American political thought is characterized by an "obsessive and unconscious commitment to a liberal faith . . . prevent[ing] it from asking profound and critical questions." She contends that the history of American political theory is not one of "bland uniformity," with sparks of "petty intellectual squabbles."²² In its place she presents a historical narrative that sees American political theory as a series of complex debates over two experiments conducted simultaneously: one in democracy, the other in tyranny. Others have detected additional ideological forms obscured by Hartz's Lockean discourse. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his associates acknowledge the dominance of "Lockeanism" in Hartz's narrative; however, extrapolating backward from what contemporary Americans say, they contend that partially "lost languages" of political discourse survive. Had Hartz listened more carefully to the modern echoes of these discourses, he would not have described American political thought as "exclusively liberal."²³ John P. Diggins, too, criticizes Hartz for a failure to acknowledge the influence of Calvinism on the Lockean idea in America.²⁴

Exaggerated Liberalism

The obverse of the missing-parts critique of *LT* focuses upon Hartz's contention that liberalism itself is an identifiably exclusive force in American political culture. The most haunting theme of *LT* is Hartz's repeated reference to the "tyranny of Locke." Critics argue that *LT* does not merely underestimate contingent factors—it spectacularly exaggerates them. One version of this judgment maintains that Hartz was excessively influenced by McCarthyism; hence his narrative emphasizes far too heavily Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority," which appears in *LT* as a "tyranny of unanimity."²⁵ For example, Joshua Dienstag, focusing on the "Lockean" figure in Hartz's narrative, contends that his storytelling embodied two elements of a consensus, one openly stated and one hidden. The former involves the assertion that Locke was the animating ideological force of the American Revolution. When that was challenged, the latter was exposed. That is, the consensus on Locke's meaning was, according to Dienstag, strong enough that Hartz "felt so comfortable that he already shared an account of Locke with his readers that he saw no need to repeat it."²⁶ Unfortunately for Hartz, Locke's meaning was contested by writers such as Leo Strauss and C. B. Macpherson. Without a consensus on Locke himself, "the storybook Locke

disappeared in a cloud of controversy, dragging Hartz's 'storybook history' along with it."²⁷ The import of Dienstag's analysis is that once readers concluded that Hartz had misread Locke, they also concluded that he must have misread his entire subject of American history. In other words, the persuasiveness of Locke in *LT* was dependent upon a cultural consensus of which Hartz was unaware.

Another version of the same critique accuses Hartz of overemphasizing the general liberal agreement on principles in America even in the 1950s and hence neglecting conflict throughout the past and present.²⁸ Thus Smith questions whether any reasonable interpretation of American history should be based upon the designation "liberal tradition," since the term "liberalism" did not appear in American discourse until at least the 1920s: "The degree to which eighteenth and nineteenth century American political actors and thinkers would have recognized themselves as fellow participants in a tradition properly designated 'liberalism' is, at best, a matter of dispute."²⁹ In both cases then, a text that is designed to challenge conventional narrative actually replicates it. Hartz simply codified a recent consensus on both Locke and liberalism generally.

David Greenstone's critique moves in the opposite direction as he retrieves early methodological attacks on Hartz. He notes Hartz's vagueness in defining "Lockeanism" and his underestimation of social conflict and government intervention in the economy. He traces these faults to the distended nature of Hartz's narrative and asks why this breadth is defective. He concludes that Hartz's narrative has only the appearance of causality because it is difficult to distinguish it from alternatives that might refute the thesis. This "boundary" problem occurs because Hartz does not listen to the political actors in the American political tradition he is narrating. Rules of behavior, even well circumscribed ones, are capable of multiple interpretations. Hartz can not detect important variations in American history because he fails to recognize the likelihood that his subjects are interpreting concepts differently within accepted boundaries and that these disagreements can lead to significant actions. Greenstone's own narrative purports to pay special attention to the hidden aspects of his subjects' behavior. If Hartz had listened to his subjects, according to Greenstone, he would have discovered a distinct polarity in the meanings they derived from the Lockean consensus (a "humanist" and a "reform" liberalism) that compete with each other throughout the American political tradition.³⁰

Testing Hartz in the 1960s

With critiques such as these, along with some theoretically intriguing alternatives, it is no wonder that Hartz's analysis should be regarded as "pretty much dead." Hartz

had misread Locke and Fitzhugh, the Revolution, the founding, and even the liberal tradition in general. There are, however, some crucial missing parts among the contra Hartz critiques. First, Hartz's misapplication of his theory to particular periods of American political development does not by itself invalidate the general theory. Nearly every argument of the Hartz critics is made by additive implication. Smith's "test case" against Hartz ends at 1920; Orren's in 1937; Greenstone's in 1865; Wood's in 1787. Second, recent studies suggest that Hartz's interpretations of past periods may not have been so far off the mark.³¹ Third, the so-called "multiple traditions" thesis is itself open to criticism not only in terms of the standard of parsimony but, as I hope to illustrate, on the grounds that it makes the same kind of errors that Hartz allegedly committed. Where Hartz presumably saw only consensus, the multiple traditions theorist can see only diversity. Thus, if *LT* suffers from confirmation bias, so too does its competitor. More important, however, it is also possible that the focus on the missing parts in Hartz's analysis overlooks or underemphasizes the capacity of a liberal society to contain, undermine, and redirect challenges without resort to support from other ideologies. Fourth, the most substantial feature of Hartz's analysis is the series of analytic concepts he employs. Hartz's readers, both those who focus upon the missing-parts critique and those who focus upon the consensus critique, almost universally ignore this aspect of his treatment of American political development. This is an astonishing omission since the concepts of liberal reform, the American democrat, liberal enlightenment, and Thermidor constitute the actual framework of *LT*.

While it is useless to guess how Hartz himself might have interpreted changes in American political culture after 1955, we can construct a test case for his theory if his account can provide a plausible interpretation of recent American political development. Any critic of Hartz must acknowledge that the turmoil of the 1960s, with its focus on race and the challenges to liberalism, do not appear to be fertile ground for a defense. The 1960s appear to violate all of the parameters set down by Hartz about American political culture. The "tyranny of Locke" was overthrown, and political discourses unacknowledged in *LT*, such as feminism and African American thought, became the central focus of American culture. Ironically from a contra-Hartz standpoint, Cold War culture was the "spawning ground"³² for these changes. Smith, for example, regards the 1960s as proof that Hartz's views on race in a liberal society are mistaken and suggests that the retreat from reforms in the period is further evidence for the multiple-positions approach.³³ Systematic confrontations with liberalism have of course appeared in other periods as well, particularly as Americans confronted industrialization and the Great Depression. Focusing on the 1960s thus permits us to not only evaluate

Hartz's analyses of these previous crises, but also to assess how they might be applied to this case.

To retain viability, the liberal society approach must be able to answer plausibly three related questions about the 1960s: Why did the patterns of protest and political and cultural experimentation emerge, especially so suddenly? Why did these patterns escalate so rapidly? Why did the 1960s end in such a contested "stalemate"?³⁴ The missing parts and consensus critiques, of course, must also answer these questions, but since *LT* has been judged as singularly lacking in accounting for new ideological forms, any extension of the Hartzian narrative seems a waste of theoretical energy. Smith, for example, argues that Hartz compounded his error in a later work by insisting that the civil rights movement confirmed rather than challenged his thesis.³⁵ For Smith, "in light of the enduring harms they wrought on millions, Hartz's minimization [of racial doctrines] was grotesque."³⁶ The ideological implications of Hartz's long-range optimism on this question, however, should not be the determining factor in the assessment of the liberal society analyst.³⁷ Rather, the issue of utility should rest on the capacity of his concepts to address the above questions. For if the liberal society approach can offer a plausible account of this period, in which ideological challenges were so prominent and intense, then perhaps theorists should reevaluate Hartz's position for other periods as well.

Liberal Enlightenment

While Hartz's concept of a reactionary enlightenment has received much attention from critics, his (unnamed) concept of liberal enlightenment, a normative principle of his analysis, has gone largely unnoticed. Without ideological competition, Americans were unable to comprehend the economic and political bases of their own thoughts and hence compulsively relied upon Locke as a symbol of national identity. Free of the feudal constraints that Europeans struggled for centuries to eliminate, America produced its own kind of tyranny—the tyranny of Locke. Unable to see the economic, cultural, and political formulations that formed their own national identity, Americans suffered from a different, and perhaps more severe, sense of irrationality than Europeans. Even its own critics, like the federalists and the Southern reactionaries, could only glimpse the contours of American culture. Adherents of political movements were simply incapable either of perceiving their opponents with any kind of objectivity, or posing their own goals clearly. The great battles between Whigs and Democrats in the nineteenth century produced "a set of victories and defeats which the Americans who experienced them scarcely understood." They reminded Hartz of "two boxers, swinging wildly, knocking each other down with accidental punches."³⁸ Progressives had not the slightest idea why

they focused upon the trusts, and New Dealers deluded themselves into portraying themselves as radicals. Those farther beyond the consensus seemed to even have less awareness: "The American Marxist learns nothing and forgets nothing."³⁹

In the final chapter of *LT*, Hartz noted that while "Americanism" appeared regularly throughout American history, repeatedly frustrating both reformist and reactionary movements, it reached its "purest form" during the Cold War. While Hartz seemed to despair that a people "born equal" could ever understand those attempting to become so, he hoped for a "coming of age" in America. "What is at stake," he concluded, "is nothing less than a new level of consciousness. . . . in which an understanding of self and an understanding of others go hand in hand." Such a battle for national self-awareness would be "well worth fighting for."⁴⁰

Was the 1960s an example of the battle Hartz hoped for? His normative argument does include intriguing perspectives on the three questions we posed about the 1960s. Hartz seemed to pose the proposition that the Cold War, with its demand for permanent global commitments and attention, would break the historical cycle of isolationism and intermittent "messianistic" intervention. There were thus "larger forces working toward a shattering of American provincialism" that held out "the hope of an inward enrichment of culture and perspective."⁴¹ Hartz was moved almost to the point of hopelessness by the irony that a society given totally to Enlightenment principles should produce such a monumental inability for self-reflection. But what if a major pattern of European political development was repeated in America?

Hartz provided the framework for this sort of analysis in his discussion of the antebellum defense of slavery. After reading George Fitzhugh's proclamation in 1863 ("We begin a great conservative reaction") and studying scores of Southern thinkers who "duplicated in every essential respect the argument of Europe's reactionary feudalism," Hartz asked how a liberal society could have "explode[d] with all the old historic tensions of Europe"? He concluded, however, that this putative "Reactionary Enlightenment" with its "massive revival of Burke, Comte, Disraeli, and Hegel below the Mason-Dixon line was in large measure a simple fraud."⁴² Society was not experiencing the advent of what Fitzhugh believed to be something new in American life, the emergence of the French Revolution in reverse; rather, it was experiencing the "impending disappearance of something very old." For whenever the Southerners talked about feudalism, they were talking about slavery. They were not feudal landlords, but, like everyone else in America, capitalists. Yet they endured the "philosophical pain" of these delusions because there was no way to accommodate their way of life in the context of a Lockean nation. Final proof of their self-deceptions was the nonchalance with which the North ignored their arguments.

Hartz's critics do not contest the illiberalism of antebellum Southerners. In fact, their collective and open rejection of liberalism appears to support the multiple-tradition approach. Critics' objections instead focus upon the marginality Hartz attributed to Southerners. For, according to the critics, Hartz grasped another part of American political culture, but he threw it away. Thus the concept of the reactionary enlightenment is a common theme of both Hartz and his critics, albeit with different assessments. Given this rare agreement, is it possible for both parties to acknowledge other "enlightenment" moments in America? What if, as a result of the Cold War, America produced, not a reactionary enlightenment, as slavery did in the nineteenth century, but a liberal one?

The question raised by Hartz's analysis, then, is what would an enlightenment movement within a pure Enlightenment society look like, and how would it develop? Was the 1960s an attempt to both cleanse America of the "irrational Locke," in terms of its current Cold War fixation, *and* to remove the remnants of reaction in the South? "The Port Huron Statement"—the urtext of the early 1960s—repeatedly paired liberal theory with liberal practice. As the Statement put it, the comfort of the current generation rested upon practices too "disturbing to dismiss." The signatories cited the impact of confronting the "human degradation" in the South as well as the awareness of their own deaths and that of "millions of abstract 'others'" created by the "enclosing fact of the Cold War."⁴³ In his famous 1965 antiwar speech, Carl Oglesby also seemed poised to engage in this project of enlightenment. Differentiating two liberalisms, one "corporate" and one "humanist," Oglesby asserted that the former performed the same function for the corporate state that the Church once performed for the feudal state and urged his audience to build a movement whose "aim is nothing less than a humanist reformation."⁴⁴

This approach to the 1960s can lead to different possible conclusions. For a society that is already liberal, what are the consequences of the systematic application of the Voltairian injunction *écrasez l'infame*? One might conclude that complete liberation from the irrational Locke is as difficult as the transition from feudalism was for European nations and that post-sixties America is thus still careening from the shock of an enlightenment within an Enlightenment society—much as France struggled throughout the nineteenth century to reach an a nationally acceptable postfeudal identity. Alternatively, one might conclude that the attempt to cleanse America of the irrational Locke leads to a process of self-destruction that in turn produces a critique not only of Locke, but of the Enlightenment itself. The first conclusion claims a model of ascent, albeit uneven, fraught with wrong turns and periods of temporary quiescence. The second is a model of descent, characterized by the same unevenness. Harvey C. Mansfield's and Barbara Ehrenreich's assessments

are two of many examples of strident disagreement on this point. For Mansfield, the decade was a "comprehensive disaster for America."⁴⁵ To Ehrenreich, on the other hand, the vision of human liberation begun in the 1960s "represents . . . the best (and perhaps the last best) hope for mankind."⁴⁶

This type of Paine/Burke division continues to haunt those who speak of the 1960s in the 1970s and beyond.⁴⁷ One can easily identify Hartz's critics in terms of this divide. Smith, for example, while he openly denies the applicability of a linear model of progress in American political culture, nevertheless regards the 1960s as representing a major (although incomplete) victory "in building a more inclusive democracy"; Bellah regards the 1960s as a period in which Tocquevillian individualism progressed in shocking proportions.

One advantage of the liberal society approach is its skepticism of analyses that see clear winners and losers. Hartz's major critique of the Progressive historians was that they could not view America from the "outside." "Blinded" by the unity of a liberal society, they constructed narratives of heroes challenged regularly by a "national villain" who would eventually be slain.⁴⁸ Such accounts had a critical veneer, but ended up confirming the belief in a "happy national family" that was the schema of existing political discourse. Multiple-tradition critics seem to replicate this historical pattern. If inequalities in America continue to persist, the reason *must* be that other ideologies are secretly at work that prevent a full flowering of liberal potential. Thus Smith concludes that "if we accept that ideologies and institutions of ascriptive hierarchy have shaped America in interaction with its liberal and democratic features, we can make more sense of a wide range of inequalitarian policies . . ."⁴⁹ Ironically it is the multiple-traditions approach that harbors a celebratory approach to American political culture.

It is unlikely that liberal society analysis of the politics of the decade, despite Hartz's own normative ambitions, would endorse a model of either ascent or descent. One might even conclude that a liberal enlightenment was "delusional," much like the nineteenth-century reactionary experience. As the Southern reactionaries were not really conservative, despite their apparent agenda, so too were the 1960s critics not really radicals, despite their apparent efforts to purify liberalism. But this unusual occurrence, a liberal enlightenment in a liberal society, nevertheless provides a useful categorization of the participants themselves, much as the phenomenon of a reactionary enlightenment did for antebellum Southerners.⁵⁰

Liberal Reform

If the concept of a liberal enlightenment can account for the debates of the 1960s as well as a general interpretive framework, what Hartz described as "liberal reform" can

account for its pace. The New Frontier and the Great Society both had all the characteristics of this phenomenon. As a movement that first appeared in the West at the end of the nineteenth century, liberal reform, according to Hartz, “sought to extend the sphere of the state and at the same time retain the principles of Locke and Bentham.”⁵¹ Though the agendas of the Progressives and even the New Dealers in America were fundamentally like those of the English liberals and French radicals, in America the embourgeoisment of the peasantry and working class, for Hartz, inoculated the American version against socialist criticism. This gave the American version of liberal reform a less defensive, even a cheerier, cast. No detailed expression of faith in private property need be offered. For Hartz, liberal reform in America has all the “youth and energy that Marxism has across the Atlantic.”⁵²

But though unfettered from the Left, American liberal reformers also were enslaved by the very Lockeanism they sought to transcend. For the Progressives, the symbol of this enslavement was the new concentration of capital in the form of the trust. If trusts could be smashed, opportunity would again reign as an operational rule, and Locke would remain intact. For the New Dealers, “experimentation” served the same hidden compulsion, since experimentation was perceived as radicalism, in that it hid the “true liberal self. . . faith in property, a belief in class unity, a suspicion of too much state power, a hostility to the utopian mood.” To Hartz, this tension between reform and return was “like the mind of a child in adolescence, torn between old taboos and new reality, forever on the verge of exploding into fantasy.” Liberal reformers were “like pitchers forever winding up but never throwing the ball.”⁵³

Assessments of the New Frontier veered dramatically in the 1970s and later. For those who treasured the “happy” 1960s, the frontier was Camelot; for those who did not, it represented Cold War liberalism indistinguishable from that of the 1950s.⁵⁴ In 1961, however, the New Frontier exhibited all the features of a return to the liberal reform as Progressivism that Hartz felt had been so entrapped by the irrational Locke. It represented a reformist impulse in the context of a viable economy; it spoke of reviving and repairing the deficiencies of capitalism; it “discovered” poverty but was ambivalent about organized labor; it offered the same evocations of public service; it attracted social scientists who offered to “professionalize” reform; and it featured the same fascination with political process.

There was one difference, however, between Progressivism and the New Frontier. Now absent was the sentimental longing for the American past that characterized previous liberal reform movements. New Frontiersmen rarely spoke of returning to any golden age. On the basis of this apparent indifference to the past, early commentators saw the New Frontier as a liberation from previous liberal reform. Norman Mailer was fascinated by Kennedy’s “aloofness,” “detachment,” and “elusiveness” at press con-

ferences. To Mailer, this edginess suggested a “conquistadorial” style that ignored the boundaries of American politics: “We as a nation would finally be loose again in the historic seas of a national psyche which was willy-nilly and at last, again, adventurous.”⁵⁵ James MacGregor Burns recommended the New Frontier as “liberalism without tears,” free of the moralism of the New Deal.⁵⁶ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was convinced that the New Frontier was quite different from past periods of liberal reform. He spoke of Kennedy as an ironist and skeptic, praised his ability to engage in self-criticism, and admired his wit and intelligence. Of the New Frontier apparatus, he spoke of their versatility and willingness to experiment (“They would try anything”), their vitality, and their toughness. But most of all, Schlesinger focused upon the “coolness” of both Kennedy and his agenda:

His “coolness” was itself new frontier. It meant freedom from the stereotyped responses of the past. It promised the deliverance of American idealism, buried deep in the national character but imprisoned by the knowingness and calculations of American society in the fifties. It held out to the young the possibility that they could become more than satisfied stockholders in a satisfied nation. It offered the hope for spontaneity in a country drowning in passivity—passive because it had come to accept the theory of its own impotence.⁵⁷

Was this kind of Nietzschean-like bravado what Hartz meant by an American coming of age, or was it, as later critics concluded, a kind of adolescence that Hartz thought so characterized American politics in the past? Both Norman Mailer and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. explored the former hypothesis. The image that Mailer invoked of JFK’s project of liberation, “Superman comes to the Supermarket,” was given a more programmatic emphasis by Schlesinger, who spoke of the Kennedy administration in terms of its victories won in the battles for “the emancipation of the American Negro” and “concern for poverty.” But Schlesinger also spoke of the sense of “impotence” in regard to the 1950s and the “energies released” by Kennedy’s leadership.⁵⁸ While there would always be a tension in America between a pragmatic and utopian liberalism, Kennedy to some extent transformed these antagonisms by offering a “politics of modernity.”

During Kennedy’s presidency, Mailer ceased to believe in his own superman analogy. The modest achievements of the administration and its Cold War orthodoxy placed JFK squarely within the parameters of liberal reform. Schlesinger countered this assessment with the assertion that to evaluate JFK’s legacy would be like evaluating Jackson’s presidency before the nullification crisis and the war on the bank, Lincoln’s six months after Gettysburg, or FDR’s after 1935. Kennedy’s assassination thus sealed his possible project of transcending the irrational Locke as one forever encased in determination of his potential.

Reactions to the assassination can be regarded as replicating certain previous interpretations of liberal reform

that Hartz had criticized. Villains were identified and momentarily vanquished, and the idea of a “happy national family” was preserved. Nostalgia—noticeably absent from New Frontier liberal reform—returned after the assassination even more powerfully than in previous periods. For example, Irving Bernstein has argued that, based upon a hypothetical trajectory of acquired skill, vision, and popularity, Kennedy “was emerging as a President of great stature” who could have recast the liberal agenda save for a “mindless assassin.”⁵⁹ Oliver Stone’s *JFK* offered a mythic account of lost opportunities.⁶⁰ His portrayal of the assassination as a coup d’état was a heroic effort to use the 1960s as a foundation for a post-Reagan liberalism. This nostalgia continues despite numerous attempts to portray JFK and the New Frontier as adolescent fantasy. Alan Brinkley writes, for example, that “Kennedy reminds Americans of a time when the nation’s capacities seemed limitless, when its future seemed unbounded, when it was possible to believe that the United States could solve social problems and accomplish great deeds without great conflict and without great cost.”⁶¹

To Hartz, Progressives made a fetish of the trust in ways no European liberal could imagine because “if the trust were at the heart of all evil, then Locke could be kept intact simply by smashing it.”⁶² Similarly, as long as if-JFK-had-lived is the analytical focus of the early 1960s, all the subsequent trauma of the decade—Vietnam, racial conflict, distrust in government—can be enclosed. As trusts in part displaced rational action for Progressives (a “compulsive ‘Americanism’ was projected upon the real economic world,” according to Hartz), so too does JFK divert attention from the failure of New Frontier liberalism to cope with the challenges facing America. Those multiple-tradition writers who highlight republicanism neatly fit into this pattern, outlined by Hartz. For Bellah, Kennedy retrieved the republican *res publica* for a new generation; for Shklar, those social scientists who reentered the political arena after the Eisenhower interregnum attempted to retrieve Jeffersonian political science. Thus to her the reemergence of republicanism was temporarily thwarted by Kennedy’s successors rather than by the paradox of American-style liberal reform as predicted by Hartz’s liberal society analysis.

As liberal reform the Great Society does not benefit from the same prophylactic, even though Lyndon Johnson announced the theme of a Great Society as an homage to the dead president. There was, in fact, even more emotive content to the Great Society than this powerful connection suggests, for Johnson broke the unholy alliance with the party’s Southern wing—something that neither FDR nor JFK dared to do. This was, of course, the initiative that suggested a monumental project of liberation. It was Johnson’s commitment to eradicating segregation in particular, and racism in general, that seemed to divest the nation of its last semifeudal remnant. To top it off, John-

son promised a war on poverty itself. The collapse of this movement of liberal reform was itself imminent within the 1960s, but for a moment it appeared that the Great Society had marshaled every possible segment of American society to produce a grand pledge of national transcendence of Locke. As Eric Goldman observed, “Working in the White House during this period produced on occasion an almost eerie feeling. The legislation rolled through the House and Senate in such profusion and so methodically that you seemed part of a vast, overpowering machinery, oiled to purr.”⁶³

While many commentators would soon conclude that Johnson’s project of liberal reform was as limited by Lockeanism as all the others in America, Johnson’s rhetoric conveyed the sense of a door unbolted. Suddenly there were intimations of a world in which communion with nature replaced its subjugation, a world in which individuals valued beauty and community above commerce: “The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.”⁶⁴ Johnson rejected other slogans, such as “Better Deal,” for his program in order to suggest “new objectives for an age of abundance . . . when . . . government must begin ministering to the social, spiritual, and aesthetic needs of the nation, as well as to its diplomatic and economic needs.”⁶⁵ In the area of civil rights, LBJ spoke of liberation in new terms. No president, not even Lincoln, identified with the cause of racial equality more comprehensively and forthrightly than Johnson. His March 1965 speech to Congress not only appropriated the movement’s anthem, “We Shall Overcome,” as a national one, but elevated the struggle to one that tied American national identity to its success. To Johnson, crises of earlier decades—the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War—did not “lay bare the secret heart of America itself” in the way that the issue of equal rights for African Americans did. Quoting Isaiah (“What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul?”), Johnson contended that all the wealth and power of this “great, rich and restless country” were worthless without a resolution to this problem.⁶⁶

If the “We Shall Overcome” address declared war on the legal toleration of racism in a liberal society through historical patterns of “systematic and ingenious discrimination,” two months later, at Howard University, Johnson seemed to confront and smash Lockeanism even more directly. Declaring that a guarantee of voting rights and the end to segregation were not enough because “you cannot take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all

others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair," he outlined a new and "more profound stage of the battle for civil rights." Johnson openly dismissed equality of opportunity as a goal and announced a policy that would promote "equality as a fact and equality as a result."⁶⁷

This rapid shift from the demand for the equality of opportunity for all to one that decreed equality of result appeared to be momentous. It seemed to suggest the basic features of revolutionary transformation: dramatic alterations in political perspectives cascading to more radical goals in a new concentrated time span. Indeed, between the two addresses, James Farmer declared a new phase of the civil rights movement that would be independent of the federal government and white America. Two months after the Howard University address, Watts erupted in riots that many commentators called "rebellion."⁶⁸

Again, liberal society analysis provides some important perspectives on both the accelerated pace of reform as well as the strident critiques that followed. Just as Daniel Moynihan was praising the Great Society for finally professionalizing reform and thus creating a permanent skilled class devoted to human betterment that made petitions and mass rallies obsolete, Paul Goodman reached exactly opposite conclusions.⁶⁹ Borrowing imaginatively from the theory of American exceptionalism, he contended that since America was without a traditional aristocracy or "totalitarian dogma," political elites maintained and extended their power though moral injunction. An ideology that was composed of "campaign slogans . . . half public relations and half corny dreams" promised liberation. But these were only "happy formulas" to "multiply professional-client" and "patron-client" relationships. By "the clubbing together" of the secular and moral leaders of society—in industry, the military, labor unions, the cities, sciences and arts, the universities, the church, and the state—the Establishment determines "not only the economy and policy but the standards and ideals of the nation." Thus a practical definition of the Great Society is: a set of programs to provide professional employment and other business for card-carrying members of the Establishment.⁷⁰

Goodman relied heavily upon his critique of the 1950s, equating Eisenhower's policies with those of JFK and Johnson. Tom Hayden, however, added another element to this critique that became a powerful model of the later, "angry" 1960s. The Great Society was a bureaucratic choke on true change in which liberal moralism was a disguise: "The poverty program, in short, assumes the poor are groups of damaged individuals who need charity, relief, technical aid, or retraining." In fact, however, its promoters could not accept the possibility that the poor are "'natives' pitted against colonial structures at home that exclude and exploit them." This "colonialism" was "as real as the more traditional colonialism of Britain and France, despite our official national ideology of equality."⁷¹

One of the recurrent patterns of liberal reform in American history, according to Hartz, was the inability of a left to challenge its inherent conservative impulses. Thus liberal reformers always looked, and believed themselves to be, more radical than they were. During the New Deal, for example, FDR was never required to respond seriously to Norman Thomas and Earl Browder, though English liberals and French radicals did contend with their counterparts on the Left. Without being forced to spell out Lockean premises about private property and a limited state, American liberal reform avoided the "atmosphere of indecision this necessarily involved."⁷² Not so, however, in the 1960s. The Great Society received its first attack from the New Left, which asserted that its radical premises were more apparent than real. Beneath the rhetorical splendor and even its administrative apparatus lay an ideology of cooptation and containment of the poor not fundamentally different from Locke's own perspectives on poverty. To a certain extent, opposition to the war in Vietnam provided the impetus and courage to question liberal reform, but the critique also seemed to emanate from a whole variety of sources. LBJ, unlike FDR, was repeatedly forced to defend the Lockean principles of liberal reform, including (especially after the urban riots) the rights of private property and law and order.

Was America, in fact, undergoing a liberal enlightenment in which the "irrational Locke" was confronted and the very foundations of Lockean rationality itself challenged? The liberal society analyst would argue that the emergence of a forceful Left critique was in fact this sort of novelty. Yet, at least in its original form, the radical project was extremely short-lived. Conservative forces rose with the same rapidity as the New Left, and liberal reform fell once again into the familiar pattern in which the defeat of Whiggery was only apparent. In this case, the timidity of the Great Society in terms of income redistribution and challenges to corporate power were hidden not by the hagiography of a president, but by analyses that centered on mistaken presidential strategic calculations. The if-JFK-had-lived explanation is replaced by a focus on guns-and-butter strategy of LBJ. If Johnson ended the war, the Great Society would have flourished and perhaps overcome the irrational Locke in the spectacular glow of a truly liberal enlightenment.

But this displacement, too, refuses to confront the perennial paradoxes of American liberal reform that cause its failure in each manifestation. For the liberal reformer seeks to use the state for her projects while remaining as skittish as her Whig rival about the capacity of the state to destroy liberty.⁷³ Alternatively, the multiple-tradition theorist must account not only for the seeming popularity of the Great Society, but also for its demise. He must find resurgent Jeffersonian impulses in Great Society programs (Bellah), the germination of democratic seeds

planted in the past (Shklar), impulses for a more inclusive democracy (Smith)—and he must also uncover illiberal counterforces that overcome them.

The American Democrat/(Liberal) Thermidor

Two more Hartz concepts provide valuable insights into the mid-1960s. Johnson's populism conflated all classes, but the focus of his programs on the poor and on minorities soon revealed the nature of what Hartz called the "American democrat." In Europe, the small-property owner and shopkeeper were severely hemmed in by other classes.⁷⁴ Both were forever described in diminished terms by other groups. The petit bourgeois was a mean-spirited yet submissive figure with a smallness of political vision. Thus the petit bourgeois is, as Hartz notes, a "familiar Western type," who has "never been glamorous in Western thought." Yet he becomes magnified almost beyond recognition in America since "the peasant is transformed into the capitalist farmer, the proletarian into the incipient entrepreneur." This hybrid can certainly be intimidated by an upper middle class, but when it collectively asserts itself, its numbers give it the appearance and force of a national will.⁷⁵ On the basis of these observations, Hartz described the American democrat as alternately a Hamlet and a Hercules. Forever suspicious of state authority, the American democrat seemed most powerful when he turned to reform and sought to capture the state in order to destroy it.

This desire to both destroy and emulate those who surround him can, as Hartz noted, be manipulated to produce indecision, loss of confidence, and submission through the tactics of "charm and terror."⁷⁶ This stratagem—discovered first, according to Hartz, by the Whigs in 1840—encouraged the American democrat either to accept Lockean premises and rise in the world, or to reject them and face rejection as an American.

The American democrat, and the petit bourgeois in general, was not at all adverse to the 1960s' liberal enlightenment and the liberal reform that attempted to encapsulate it. But twin feelings of resentment and admiration for classes both above and below that of the American democrat exploded in the late 1960s. The classes from both above and below were receiving enormous benefits in the form of draft deferments and affirmative action. More generally, the counterculture systematically attacked the core values of the American democrat: family, hard work, delayed gratification. Michael Novak spoke for a portion of this group resentment when he reversed the object of the New Left signifier, PIGS, to read Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slovaks.⁷⁷ Christopher Lasch, one of the few writers who provides a sympathetic account of Hartz's American democrat, analyzed this group's sentiments of betrayal. Liberals, who were supposed to protect them against market forces, had abandoned their cause. Very

quickly a new kind of class analysis (remarkably similar to Jacksonian rhetoric) began to appear in which "limousine liberals" and "rich people in the suburbs" with so-called moral agendas exploited the "plain people of the city."⁷⁸ In his ethnographic study of Carnesie in the mid-1970s, Jonathan Reider found liberalism described by residents as associated with "profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness."⁷⁹ Thus protest against 1960s protest was framed more in terms of American-style class conflict (with the American democrat ascendant) than ascriptive appeals. Ironically, from the liberal society approach even Greenstone's "reform liberalism," with its agenda of moral development, is seen by the American democrat as an elitist agenda.

It was difficult for the Republican Party, as Hartz noted it was for the Whigs, to capitalize upon this resentment.⁸⁰ But as Hartz also observed, in the nineteenth century there were limits to how many times politicians like Thurlow Weed and Daniel Webster were willing to commit political suicide. So too, there were limits to how many times followers of Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater would do the same. Various formulas of Whig victory are possible in American culture (as the Reagan revolution later illustrates). But in this decade, what better representative of the American democrat was there than Richard Nixon? Nixon's background—his father was a trolley operator and much-failed entrepreneur—and career were exemplars of the American democrat in terms of its frustrations, hatreds, and emulative successes. The Herblock cartoons of Nixon in particular trade upon class stereotypes of the street lawyer and car salesman. Adlai Stevenson's observations on "Nixonland" as a place characterized by "hustling, pushing, shoving—the land of smash and grab and anything to win" also spoke by innuendo of the upper-class disdain for the ambition of the arriviste.⁸¹

One of Hartz's insights about the American democrat is that the petit bourgeois perspective is close to the national one. Nixon confirms this observation in his own multiclass analysis. In his acceptance address for his party's nomination, Nixon focused upon the two nightmares of 1968—civil disorder and Vietnam: "[W]e see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans dying on distant battlefields abroad." Though promising national reconciliation and even a continuation of reform, Nixon nevertheless raised the question of the costs of change: "As we see and hear these things, millions of Americans cry out in anguish: Did we come all this way for this? Did American boys die in Normandy and Korea and in Valley Forge for this?" Then came the elucidation of the voice that became identified as the "silent majority":

It is another voice, it is a quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators. They're good people. They're decent people. They work and they

save and they pay taxes and they care. They work in factories, they run businesses, they serve in government. They provide most of the soldiers who die to keep it free. They give the spirit to America.⁸²

Nixon managed to include workers, capitalists, and bureaucrats in his description without pausing to note any differences, thus conveying a category that is broader than a class, even a swollen class, and suggesting the existence and reassertion of a nation. In fact, the trope “silent majority” has all the earmarks of the discourse of an aggrieved nation. There is the sense of common identity, the pervasive feelings of resentment and anger at past injustices, the determination to take power and be rid of “others.” This class resentment, transformed into nationalism, formed the core meaning of what Nixon called the “new American revolution” and constituted in Hartzian terms the “Herculean” moment for the American democrat.

It was one of the ironies of the 1960s’ version of liberal reform that it seemed to produce new “nations” with a dizzying rapidity. First, there was the notion of racial identity, given expression in the Kerner Commission report and in various black nationalist groups. Then there was the concept of a separate cultural identity, epitomized by the Woodstock Nation. Activists Michael Ferber and Staughton Lynd asserted in 1971 that there was no longer a single movement in America, but many “nations . . . still in growing numbers” with “plans and theories, organizations and life styles, dreams and ‘trips’ that will take us out of the murderous wasteland of America.”⁸³

The overriding project of these formulations was to be liberated from the Lockean nation. Nixon’s project, in response, had a clear Thermidorian cast. Hartz said about the Constitutional convention and the rise of Federalist thought in general that “a liberal society could produce, as anomalous as the language seems, a liberal reaction.”⁸⁴ Again, for Hartz, a liberal Thermidor rested primarily upon imaginary assessments of social forces. Federalists did not face a threat from “Levelers” nor were anti-Federalist characterizations of their opponents as monarchists accurate. But Hartz does note a purposeful rhetorical shift in the world of the Federalists. Although he accepted the predominance of pessimistic views of human nature in the *Federalist Papers*, he reminded readers that all negative views are not alike: “There is a feudal bleakness about man which sees him fit only for external domination, and there is a liberal bleakness about man which sees him working autonomously on the basis of his own self-interest.”⁸⁵ Thus liberal Thermidors were like Thermidors in general in the sense that they are characterized by a loss of optimism, a determination to restrain democratic “excess,” and the rise of new “Bonapartist” executive structures. But they were unlike them in that both “democrats” and “reactionaries” held common commitments. How could the American democrat have the will to destroy his “rich” Whig cousin, whom he really hoped to emulate, and how could his

Thermidorian opponent destroy his counterpart when he too was a democrat? How, too, could even a new “imperialist president” fully remove all Whig restrictions attached to the office in a society that so feared the state?⁸⁶

Many of Nixon’s policies did in fact continue liberal reform. But there was nevertheless the kind of severe retrenchment, particularly in regard to cultural issues, that is characteristic of Thermidors. He reminded his audience that “the first prerequisite of progress is order.” While promising adherence to Lockean legalism, he still spoke harshly of the courts’ role in “weakening the peace forces as against the criminal forces in this country.” One of his few specific campaign pledges was a promise to appoint a new attorney general to “launch a war” against criminal elements throughout the land. Shortly after his election, the Nixon administration in response to a violent protest against the president in San Jose, unleashed a barrage of epithets against the peace movement. They were “thugs and hoodlums,” “anarchistic nihilistic extremists,” “terrorists of the far left,” and “violent thugs.” Mixing the 1930s with the 1960s, Nixon promised “no appeasement of rock throwers.” He declared Charles Manson guilty and drew direct parallels between the Tate-La Bianca murders and “permissiveness.”⁸⁷ Nixon expressed his attachment to the American democrat in his usual visceral manner to H. R. Haldeman. The current “ultra-liberal” leadership class in “this period of our history” was “decadent” and without “character” and “guts.” The “ordinary working guy” was “all that was left of the character of this nation.”⁸⁸

Hartz’s concepts of American democrat and liberal Thermidor provide an explanation for the stalemated “end” of the 1960s. While liberal reform in this case may have produced a forceful critique from the left unlike previous cases, it also awakened other historically powerful cultural forces. There are, of course, recourses for the multiple-tradition approach to deal with this account. Smith, for example, contends that liberal reform itself awakens illiberal impulses in what Hartz calls the American democrat. Threatened by change, he becomes receptive to submerged ascriptive appeals and thus actively supports Thermidorian projects. In fact, for Smith, American history is strewn with many Thermidors fired by racists, misogynists, and ethnic ideologues. Smith admits that the “civil rights reforms of the 1960s and 1970s are not as seriously threatened today as were the civil rights measures of the 1860s in the 1890s.”⁸⁹ Nevertheless, he cites as evidence of persistent ascriptive ideologies: “[T]he Buchanan and Duke campaigns, the Christian coalition, the Los Angeles riots, the English only agitation, and the popularity of anti-Japanese novels.”⁹⁰ As troubling as these examples might be, the pertinent question is whether the post-1960s Thermidor is more economically and persuasively accounted for by the unique American demos that Hartz called the American democrat, who responded to Whig arguments

about returning to the charm of Locke and the terror of abandoning him long before these movements appeared—then by an appeal to alternative traditions.

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest that however contested Hartz's analysis might be on particular periods of American political development, the concepts he employs are capable of providing an account of recent political change. It is possible, of course, that these concepts could be applied in different ways than the narrative I have offered. However, in its basic format, Hartz's theory provides plausible explanations for three significant questions about the politics of the 1960s.

The liberal enlightenment is certainly the most underdeveloped and normative concept of Hartz's analysis, but it is suggestive in several respects. Hartz predicted that the constant focus abroad demanded by the Cold War might well break down the "tyranny of Locke" in American culture. Hartz was unclear about what forms this national liberation might assume, but it is certainly possible to think of the politics of the 1960s in these terms. If the attempt to discover and apply alternative theories of American identity is one aspect of this "coming of age," then Hartz's scenario is relevant to the decade. If any characterization can be made about the decade in this regard, it is that the 1960s were overtheorized by its participants. The concept of liberation from Locke veered wildly from one interpretation to another. Although the early 1960s quickly came to be regarded as overly cautious in its break with the 1950s, this instance of liberal reform fervently sought to define itself in terms of its newness and reassertion of sacrifice and risk. The later 1960s was an arena for an array of theories that attempted to explain what was going on, ranging from a myriad of cultural experiments in drugs, personal style, and sexual arrangements to new political theories about race, political tactics, and global change. Even its Thermidor produced new formulations of national identity for the American democrat.

The liberal society analyst must be prepared to entertain fantastic political formulations as well as predictable ones. The emergence of a liberal enlightenment within a society already liberal is certainly as bizarre a development as its nineteenth-century reactionary counterpart has been, at least in terms of European political development. However, in terms of both its unexpected features and its anticipated ones, the new liberal enlightenment was part of a recurring pattern in which the

actual contours of Lockean dominance are briefly appreciated. Like the theorists of the reactionary enlightenment, many 1960s activists glimpsed the cultural configurations that animated Lockean "tyranny" as they were at the same time misjudging its strength and rationality. In this respect, although the 1960s were exceptional in that a left critique of liberal reform did emerge, the resurgence of the American democrat in Thermidorian form replicated past cultural patterns.

Was it possible that the 1960s project, the liberation from the irrational Locke, was so traumatic that it produced a theoretical impasse? The ascent and descent models that followed the decade were attempts to make sense of the 1960s, but neither was quite able to establish itself as the authoritative reading. In fact, many critiques of Hartz are themselves examples of this phenomenon. As I noted, Hartz was extremely suspicious of the tendency of the student of American politics to make her observations from "within the nation." Hartz's critics, of course, make this very point about *LT* itself. Thus Hartz is charged with ignoring major parts of American political culture or assigning an imaginary consensus to the outcome of conflicts. Yet, which account—Hartz's or his critics—is more than an "erudite reflection of the limited perspectives of the average American himself"? Is it Greenstone's, which constructs a contest between two liberalisms, one good and one bad? Is it Dienstag's, which asserts in 1996 the end of the dominance of Locke at the moment when theorists would soon write about the "end of history" and the globalization of Lockeanism? Is it Shklar, who sees America as a unique experiment brought to Hegelian-like fulfillment from the "intellectual germs" of the founders and redeemed historically through constant struggle? And what could be more American exceptionalist than the belief that the triumph of democracy is really not an American idea, but a universal idea, working its way through humanity with America as its world carrier? Is it Smith, who urges us to do "greater justice" to those denied access to the liberal tradition and who contends that there are people committed

to add upon the "achievements of Americans in building a more inclusive democracy" so that "illiberal forces will not prevail"?

The promise of the multiple traditions approach rests upon its capacity to identify patterns of American political development unaccounted for in the liberal society model. Smith, for example, contends that the reassertion of nonliberal values is explained by the inability of Lockean concepts to reassure those threatened by their broader application. Insecure citizens thus search for ever new forms

The liberal society analyst must be prepared to entertain fantastic political formulations as well as predictable ones.

of ascription to “reinvigorate the hierarchies they esteem.” Shklar posits the continued struggle between democracy and tyranny. Thus once the multiple-tradition approach assumes the existence of other forms, it theoretically wills their appearance. As Daniel Rogers has argued in terms of those who search for historical manifestations of republicanism, the assertion of paradigmatic strength hides its empirical fragility.⁹¹ But, as I have suggested in the case of the 1960s, there is ample room within the liberal tradition itself to fashion a retreat from reform in response to the demands of the American democrat. Moreover, the multiple-traditions approach acknowledges that the liberal tradition has, in Smith’s words, “great normative and political potency.”⁹²

The liberal society approach outlined by Hartz that seeks to find “national weaknesses” with “no absolute assurance on the basis of the past that they will be remedied” is a better one both in terms of understanding the 1960s and American political culture in general. For that decade, though unique in some respects, seeing as it did, if only for a moment, the possibilities of a liberal enlightenment, offered an opening for a Left critique of liberal reform. It also triggered the same patterns as the past: a period of liberal reform that both attacked and sought to preserve Lockean beliefs, a resurgence of the American democrat as a Hercules (only to be disarmed as Hamlet), and the appearance of a (liberal) Thermidor that excited conservatives and terrified reformers and radicals.

American political culture after the events of 9/11 may provide yet another opportunity to reexamine the liberal society thesis, for the sense of mission and threat to America is at least as intense as it was in the early days of the Cold War. The question that Hartz posed in 1955 is once again painfully relevant: “Must a liberal community, in addition to all of the massive problems of diplomacy and freedom any great nation faces in the modern world, be forever saddled with the peculiar limitations of its own perspective?” Is it not still true “to say that America must look to its contact with other nations to provide that grain of insight that its own history has denied it?”⁹³ After all these years, we are left, then, with Louis Hartz as the author of the most potent interpretation of American political thought.

Notes

- 1 Woodward 1968.
- 2 Lipset 1963; McConnell 1966; Potter 1954; McCloskey 1958; Huntington 1981.
- 3 Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Jenkins and Sofos 1996.
- 4 Garcia-Moreno and Pfeiffer 1996.
- 5 Fowler 1999, 35.
- 6 Abbott 2001.
- 7 Powell 1955, 12.
- 8 Koch 1955, 551–52.
- 9 Brown 1955, 314.
- 10 McKittrick 1955, 25.
- 11 McNaught 1974, 410.
- 12 Hartz (1974) hurled the charge back at the critic: “Professor McNaught maintains a logical position in his criticism of my work: having asserted the presence in the United States of the elements yielding a powerful socialist movement, he goes on to imply that such a movement actually existed” (p. 421).
- 13 Orren 1991, 1.
- 14 Bailyn 1967; Wood 1969.
- 15 Berthoff and Murrin 1973, 286–87. See also see Barber 1986, 356–57.
- 16 Hartz 1955, 170.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 18 Smith 1997, 287–88.
- 19 Shklar 1991a; Shklar 1991b.
- 20 Smith 1997, 28.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 21. Hartz (1955) clearly intended his efforts as a counterweight to celebratory interpretations of American political culture; he reiterated his aim in the first and last chapters (pp. 32, 309).
- 22 Shklar 1991a, 3–4.
- 23 Bellah et al. 1985, 311.
- 24 Diggins 1984, 103–5.
- 25 Roelofs 1998, 31; Fowler 1999, 29; Young 1996, 11.
- 26 Dienstag 1996, 499.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Smith 1997, 24–26.
- 29 Smith 1999, 16.
- 30 Greenstone 1993, 54–55.
- 31 Ericson (2001) has studied the debate over Hartz’s analysis of the slavery “test case” and concluded that while Hartz “erred in viewing the proslavery dilemma primarily as a psychological dilemma rather than a rhetorical one,” by recasting his thesis the liberal society position is actually “stronger . . . than he himself cast it” (p. 10). Daniel Rodgers (1992) has employed much the same strategy in terms of republicanism and the American Revolution. T. H. Breen 2004 presents a bold challenge to the thesis that republicanism was the animating force of the revolution. He contends that the imperial economy established by Great Britain inadvertently invented choice of consumer goods as a basic feature of life. The American Revolution, in his reading, was based upon guaranteeing the right of consumer choice, a very modern and decidedly liberal perspective. Brinkley 1995 and Brands 2001 offer interpretations of the New Deal and the Cold War that parallel Hartz’s accounts.

- 32 Anderson 1996, 4.
- 33 Smith 1993, 555, 563; Smith 1999, 9.
- 34 Steigerwald 1995 and Isserman and Kazin 2000 discuss the stalemate question from different perspectives.
- 35 Hartz argued in *The Founding of New Societies* that emancipation was a “revolutionary matter in Enlightenment fragments” and thus arguments over race are “more passionately doctrinaire” with the side favoring equal treatment possessing “an enormous source of strength.” He did not suggest that racism was not a monumental problem in liberal societies. On the contrary, a “feudal ethos, being more absorptive in the realm of race, purchases immunity from the storms of Little Rock at the price of a traditionalist social order” (pp. 17, 62, 114). The impact of a liberal society for the American Indian was, according to Hartz, catastrophic and he speculates on the possible course of American political development had this group not been “eliminated” (1964, 94–99).
- 36 Smith 1997, 554.
- 37 Hartz (1955) did note that the “theory of racial supremacy found a twisted root in American life” in the beliefs of a “thousand drug store Gobineaus” (p. 291).
- 38 Hartz 1955, 90.
- 39 Ibid., 277.
- 40 Ibid., 308–9.
- 41 Ibid., 308. Historical narratives of the decade generally support Hartz’s prediction. See Matusow 1984; Gitlin 1993; Anderson 1996.
- 42 Hartz 1955, 147.
- 43 Students for Democratic Society 1995, 62.
- 44 Oglesby 1995, 224–25.
- 45 Mansfield 1997, 21.
- 46 Ehrenreich 1992, 234.
- 47 Compare, for example, Gitlin 1993 (p. 438) and Collier and Horowitz 1989 (p. 265).
- 48 Hartz 1955, 27–32.
- 49 Smith 1993, 562.
- 50 The theoretical projects of Holland (2001) and Norton (1993) are examples of the innovative capacities of Hartz’s concept of liberal enlightenment.
- 51 Hartz 1955, 259.
- 52 Ibid., 261.
- 53 Ibid., 270, 237–38.
- 54 Compare, for example, Miroff 1976 and Bernstein 1991.
- 55 Mailer 1964, 46.
- 56 Burns 1960.
- 57 Schlesinger 1965, 115–16.
- 58 Ibid., 747.
- 59 Bernstein 1991, 298.
- 60 Stone and Sklar 1992.
- 61 Brinkley 1998, 220.
- 62 Hartz 1955, 232.
- 63 Goldman 1969, 334.
- 64 Johnson 1965, 704.
- 65 Schulman 1995, 84.
- 66 Johnson 1966, 281.
- 67 Ibid., 635.
- 68 This view of the radical impetus of the Great Society is still sometimes advanced. See Davies 1996, where the programs are portrayed as an aborted “entitlement revolution.”
- 69 Moynihan 1965; Goodman 1967.
- 70 Goodman 1967, 516–17.
- 71 Hayden 1967, 481–82.
- 72 Hartz 1955, 261.
- 73 For an evaluation of the Great Society that adopts this approach, see DeHaven-Smith 1988.
- 74 See Bechhoefer and Elliot 1983 for a discussion of European petit bourgeoisie values as a defensive reaction.
- 75 Hartz 1955, 114–15.
- 76 Goodwyn 1978 describes this kind of reaction in the Populist movement after 1900.
- 77 Novak 1972. Many subsequent analysts have incorporated Hartz’s American democrat into their accounts of the period. See Reider 1985; Leshner 1994.
- 78 Lasch 1991, 478.
- 79 Reider 1985, 6.
- 80 Reider 1989 discusses efforts to on the part of the right to shed its “remnant identity” in the late sixties.
- 81 Nixon tried to appeal to the American democrat as early as his campaign for class president at Whittier. See Matthews 1996, 24–25; Ambrose 1987, 59–64. See also his own account (1962) of Alger Hiss as an ungrateful figure of privilege and the “class war” that he felt was waged against him for his role in the case (pp. 1–71). Nixon’s affinity to the American democrat is the reason Wicker (1991) concludes that he is “one of us” (pp. 686–87).
- 82 *New York Times* 1968.
- 83 Ferber and Lynd 1971, ix.
- 84 Hartz 1955, 70.
- 85 Ibid., 80.
- 86 Thus Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s comparison of Nixon to Louis Bonaparte (1973, 254–55) captured half of Hartz’s insight.
- 87 Graham 1970; Semple 1970; *New York Times* 1970.
- 88 Haldeman 1994, 326.
- 89 Smith 1993, 563.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Rodgers 1992, 38.
- 92 Smith 1993, 558.
- 93 Hartz 1955, 287.

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