

FROM: LOUIS HARTZ, THE LIBERAL TRADITION  
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CHAPTER ONE

## The Concept of a Liberal Society

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### 1. *America and Europe*

The analysis which this book contains is based on what might be called the storybook truth about American history: that America was settled by men who fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World. If there is anything in this view, as old as the national folklore itself, then the outstanding thing about the American community in Western history ought to be the non-existence of those oppressions, or since the reaction against them was in the broadest sense liberal, that the American community is a liberal community. We are confronted, as it were, with a kind of inverted Trotskyite law of combined development, America skipping the feudal stage of history as Russia presumably skipped the liberal stage. I know that I am using broad terms broadly here. "Feudalism" refers technically to the institutions of the medieval era, and it is well known that aspects of the decadent feudalism of the later period, such as primogeniture, entail, and quitrents, were present in America even in the eighteenth century.\* "Liberalism" is an even

\* There is no precise term for feudal institutions and feudal ideas as they persisted into the modern period amid the national states and economic movements which progressively undermined them. The phrases

vaguer term, clouded as it is by all sorts of modern social reform connotations, and even when one insists on using it in the classic Lockian sense, as I shall insist here, there are aspects of our original life in the Puritan colonies and the South which hardly fit its meaning. But these are the liabilities of any large generalization, danger points but not insuperable barriers. What in the end is more interesting is the curious failure of American historians, after repeating endlessly that America was grounded in escape from the European past, to interpret our history in the light of that fact. There are a number of reasons for this which we shall encounter before we are through, but one is obvious at the outset: the separation of the study of American from European history and politics. Any attempt to uncover the nature of an American society without feudalism can only be accomplished by studying it in conjunction with a European society where the feudal structure and the feudal ethos did in fact survive. This is not to deny our national uniqueness, one of the reasons curiously given for studying America alone, but actually to affirm it. How can we know the uniqueness of anything except by contrasting it with what is not unique? The rationale for a separate American study, once you begin to think about it, explodes the study itself.

In the end, however, it is not logic but experience, to use a Holmesian phrase, which exposes the traditional

"quasi-feudal" and "ancien régime" are nebulous enough. Some historians speak of "corporate society," but since a good deal more is involved than a congeries of associational units and since "corporate" is often used to describe current fascist states, the term has disadvantages. Under the circumstances it seems best to retain the simple word "feudal," realizing that its technical meaning is stretched when one applies it in the modern era.

approach. We could use our uniqueness as an excuse for evading its study so long as our world position did not really require us to know much about it. Now that a whole series of alien cultures have crashed in upon the American world, shattering the peaceful landscape of Bancroft and Beard, the old non sequitur simply will not do. When we need desperately to know the idiosyncrasies which interfere with our understanding of Europe, we can hardly break away from "European schemes" of analysis, as J. Franklin Jameson urged American historians to do in 1891 (not that they ever really used them in the first place) on the ground that we are idiosyncratic. [But the issue is deeper than foreign policy, for the world involvement has also brought to the surface of American life great new domestic forces which must remain inexplicable without comparative study.] It has redefined, as Communism shows, the issue of our internal freedom in terms of our external life. [So in fact it is the entire crisis of our time which compels us to make that journey to Europe and back which ends in the discovery of the American liberal world.]

does not follow

## 2. "Natural Liberalism": The Frame of Mind

One of the central characteristics of a nonfeudal society is that it lacks a genuine revolutionary tradition, the tradition which in Europe has been linked with the Puritan and French revolutions: that it is "born equal," as Tocqueville said. And this being the case, it lacks also a tradition of reaction: lacking Robespierre it lacks Maistre, lacking Sydney it lacks Charles II. Its liberalism is what Santayana called, referring to American democracy, a "natural" phenomenon. [But the matter is curiously broader

than this, for a society which begins with Locke, and thus transforms him, stays with Locke, by virtue of an absolute and irrational attachment it develops for him, and becomes as indifferent to the challenge of socialism in the later era as it was unfamiliar with the heritage of feudalism in the earlier one.] It has within it, as it were, a kind of self-completing mechanism, which insures the universality of the liberal idea. Here, we shall see, is one of the places where Marx went wrong in his historical analysis, attributing as he did the emergence of the socialist ideology to the objective movement of economic forces. Actually socialism is largely an ideological phenomenon, arising out of the principles of class and the revolutionary liberal revolt against them which the old European order inspired. [It is not accidental that America which has uniquely lacked a feudal tradition has uniquely lacked also a socialist tradition. The hidden origin of socialist thought everywhere in the West is to be found in the feudal ethos.] The *ancien régime* inspires Rousseau; both inspire Marx.

Which brings us to the substantive quality of the natural liberal mind. And this poses no easy problem. For when the words of Locke are used and a prior Filmer is absent, how are we to delineate the significance of the latter fact? In politics men who make speeches do not go out of their way to explain how differently they would speak if the enemies they had were larger in size or different in character. On the contrary whatever enemies they fight they paint in satanic terms, so that a problem sufficiently difficult to begin with in a liberal society becomes complicated further by the inevitable perspectives of political battle. Take the American Revolution. With

John Adams identifying the Stamp Act with the worst of the historic European oppressions, how can we distinguish the man from Lilburne or the philosophers of the French Enlightenment? And yet if we study the American liberal language in terms of intensity and emphasis, if we look for silent omissions as well as explicit inclusions, we begin to see a pattern emerging that smacks distinctively of the New World. It has a quiet, matter of fact quality, it does not understand the meaning of sovereign power, the bourgeois class passion is scarcely present, the sense of the past is altered, and there is about it all, as compared with the European pattern, a vast and almost charming innocence of mind. Twain's "Innocents Abroad" is a pretty relevant concept, for the psyche that springs from social war and social revolution is given to far suspicions and sidelong glances that the American liberal cannot easily understand. Possibly this is what people mean when they say that European thought is "deeper" than American, though anyone who tries to grapple with America in Western terms will wonder whether the term "depth" is the proper one to use. There can be an appalling complexity to innocence, especially if your point of departure is guilt.

Now if the *ancien régime* is not present to begin with, one thing follows automatically: it does not return in a blaze of glory. It does not flower in the nineteenth century in a Disraeli or a Ballanche, however different from each other these men may be. I do not mean to imply that no trace of the feudal urge, no shadow whatsoever of Sir Walter Scott, has been found on the hills and plains of the New World. One can get into a lot of useless argument if he affirms the liberalness of a liberal society in

absolute mathematical fashion. The top strata of the American community, from the time of Peggy Hutchinson to the time of Margaret Kennedy, have yearned for the aristocratic ethos. But instead of exemplifying the typical Western situation, these yearnings represent an inversion of it. America has presented the world with the peculiar phenomenon, not of a frustrated middle class, but of a "frustrated aristocracy"—of men, Aristotelian-like, trying to break out of the egalitarian confines of middle class life but suffering guilt and failure in the process. The South before the Civil War is the case par excellence of this, though New England of course exemplifies it also. Driven away from Jefferson by abolitionism, the Fitzhughs of the ante-bellum era actually dared to ape the doctrinal patterns of the Western reaction, of Disraeli and Bonald. But when Jefferson is traditional, European traditionalism is a curious thing indeed. The Southerners were thrown into fantastic contradictions by their iconoclastic conservatism, by what I have called the "Reactionary Enlightenment," and after the Civil War for good historical reasons they fell quickly into oblivion. The South, as John Crowe Ransom has said, has been the part of America closest to Old World Europe, but it has never really been Europe. It has been an alien child in a liberal family, tortured and confused, driven to a fantasy life which, instead of disproving the power of Locke in America, portrays more poignantly than anything else the tyranny he has had.

But is not the problem of Fitzhugh at once the problem of De Leon? Here we have one of the great and neglected relationships in American history: the common fecklessness of the Southern "feudalists" and the modern socialists. It is not accidental, but something rooted in the logic

of all of Western history, that they should fail alike to leave a dent in the American liberal intelligence. For if the concept of class was meaningless in its Disraelian form, and if American liberalism had never acquired it in its bourgeois form, why should it be any more meaningful in its Marxian form? This secret process of ideological transmission is not, however, the only thing involved. Socialism arises not only to fight capitalism but remnants of feudalism itself, so that the failure of the Southern Filmerians, in addition to setting the pattern for the failure of the later Marxists, robbed them in the process of a normal ground for growth. Could De Leon take over the liberal goal of extended suffrage as Lasalle did in Germany or the crusade against the House of Lords as the Labor Party did in England? Marx himself noted the absence of an American feudalism, but since he misinterpreted the complex origins of European socialism in the European *ancien régime*, he did not grasp the significance of it.

Surely, then, it is a remarkable force: this fixed, dogmatic liberalism of a liberal way of life. It is the secret root from which have sprung many of the most puzzling of American cultural phenomena. Take the unusual power of the Supreme Court and the cult of constitution worship on which it rests. Federal factors apart, judicial review as it has worked in America would be inconceivable without the national acceptance of the Lockian creed, ultimately enshrined in the Constitution, since the removal of high policy to the realm of adjudication implies a prior recognition of the principles to be legally interpreted. At the very moment that Senator Benton was hailing the rise of America's constitutional fetishism, in France Royer Colard and the Doctrinaires were desperately trying to build

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precisely the same atmosphere around the Restoration Charter of 1814, but being a patchwork of Maistre and Rousseau, that constitutional document exploded in their faces in the July Revolution. *Inter arma leges silent*. If in England a marvelous organic cohesion has held together the feudal, liberal, and socialist ideas, it would still be unthinkable there that the largest issues of public policy should be put before nine Talmudic judges examining a single text. But this is merely another way of saying that law has flourished on the corpse of philosophy in America, for the settlement of the ultimate moral question is the end of speculation upon it. Pragmatism, interestingly enough America's great contribution to the philosophic tradition, does not alter this, since it feeds itself on the Lockian settlement. It is only when you take your ethics for granted that all problems emerge as problems of technique. Not that this is a bar in America to institutional innovations of highly non-Lockian kind. Indeed, as the New Deal shows, when you simply "solve problems" on the basis of a submerged and absolute liberal faith, you can depart from Locke with a kind of inventive freedom that European Liberal reformers and even European socialists, dominated by ideological systems, cannot duplicate. But the main point remains: if Fitzhugh and De Leon were crucified by the American general will, John Marshall and John Dewey flourished in consequence of their crucifixion. The moral unanimity of a liberal society reaches out in many directions.

At bottom it is riddled with paradox. Here is a Lockian doctrine which in the West as a whole is the symbol of rationalism, yet in America the devotion to it has been so irrational that it has not even been recognized for what

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it is: liberalism. There has never been a "liberal movement" or a real "liberal party" in America: we have only had the American Way of Life, a nationalist articulation of Locke which usually does not know that Locke himself is involved; and we did not even get that until after the Civil War when the Whigs of the nation, deserting the Hamiltonian tradition, saw the capital that could be made out of it. This is why even critics who have noticed America's moral unity have usually missed its substance. Ironically, "liberalism" is a stranger in the land of its greatest realization and fulfillment. But this is not all. Here is a doctrine which everywhere in the West has been a glorious symbol of individual liberty, yet in America its compulsive power has been so great that it has posed a threat to liberty itself. Actually Locke has a hidden conformitarian germ to begin with, since natural law tells equal people equal things, but when this germ is fed by the explosive power of modern nationalism, it mushrooms into something pretty remarkable. One can reasonably wonder about the liberty one finds in Burke.

I believe that this is the basic ethical problem of a liberal society: not the danger of the majority which has been its conscious fear, but the danger of unanimity, which has slumbered unconsciously behind it: the "tyranny of opinion" that Tocqueville saw unfolding as even the pathetic social distinctions of the Federalist era collapsed before his eyes. But in recent times this manifestation of irrational Lockianism, or of "Americanism," to use a favorite term of the American Legion, one of the best expounders of the national spirit that Whiggery discovered after the Civil War, has neither slumbered nor been unconscious. It has been very much awake in a red scare

hysteria which no other nation in the West has really been able to understand. [And this suggests a very significant principle: that when a liberal community faces military and ideological pressure from without it transforms eccentricity into sin, and the irritating figure of the bourgeois gossip flowers into the frightening figure of an A. Mitchell Palmer or a Senator McCarthy.] Do we not find here, hidden away at the base of the American mind, one of the reasons why its legalism has been so imperfect a barrier against the violent moods of its mass Lockianism? If the latter is nourished by the former, how can we expect it to be strong? We say of the Supreme Court that it is courageous when it challenges Jefferson, but since in a liberal society the individualism of Hamilton is also a secret part of the Jeffersonian psyche, we make too much of this. The real test of the Court is when it faces the excitement both of Jefferson and Hamilton, when the Talmudic text is itself at stake, when the general will on which it feeds rises to the surface in anger. And here, brave as the Court has been at moments, its record has been no more heroic than the logic of the situation would suggest.

The decisive domestic issue of our time may well lie in the counter resources a liberal society can muster against this deep and unwritten tyrannical compulsion it contains. They exist. Given the individualist nature of the Lockian doctrine, there is always a logical impulse within it to transcend the very conformitarian spirit it breeds in a Lockian society: witness the spirit of Holmes and Hand. Given the fact, which we shall study at length later, that "Americanism" oddly disadvantages the Progressive despite the fact that he shares it to the full, there is always

a strategic impulse within him to transcend it: witness the spirit of Brandeis, Roosevelt, and Stevenson. In some sense the tragedy of these movements has lain in the imperfect knowledge they have had of the enemy they face, above all in their failure to see their own unwitting contribution to his strength. The record of Brandeis was good on civil liberties, but anyone who studies his Progressive thought will see that he was, for good or bad, on that score a vital part of the compulsive "Americanism" which bred the hysteria he fought. The Progressive tradition, if it is to transcend the national general will, has got to realize, as it has not yet done, how deeply its own Jacksonian heroes have been rooted in it.

[But the most powerful force working to shatter the American absolutism is, paradoxically enough, the very international involvement which tensifies it.] This involvement is complex in its implications. [If in the context of the Russian Revolution it elicits a domestic redscare, in the context of diplomacy it elicits an impulse to impose Locke everywhere.] The way in which "Americanism" brings McCarthy together with Wilson is of great significance and it is, needless to say, another one of Progressivism's neglected roots in the Rousseauan tide it often seeks to stem. [Thus to say that world politics shatters "Americanism" at the moment it intensifies it is to say a lot: it is to say that the basic horizons of the nation both at home and abroad are drastically widened by it.] But has this not been the obvious experience of the recent past? Along with the fetish that has been made of Locke at peace conferences and at Congressional investigations has not Locke suffered a relativistic beating at the same time? You can turn the issue of Wilsonianism upside

down: when has the nation appreciated more keenly the limits of its own cultural pattern as applied to the rest of the world? [You can turn the issue of McCarthyism upside down: when has the meaning of civil liberties been more ardently understood than now?] A dialectic process is at work, evil eliciting the challenge of a conscious good, so that in difficult moments progress is made. The outcome of the battle between intensified "Americanism" and new enlightenment is still an open question.

Historically the issue here is one for which we have little precedent. It raises the question of whether a nation can compensate for the uniformity of its domestic life by contact with alien cultures outside it. It asks whether American liberalism can acquire through external experience that sense of relativity, that spark of philosophy which European liberalism acquired through an internal experience of social diversity and social conflict. But if the final problem posed by the American liberal community is bizarre, this is merely a continuation of its historic record. That community has always been a place where the common issues of the West have taken strange and singular shape.

### 3. *The Dynamics of a Liberal Society*

So far I have spoken of natural liberalism as a psychological whole, embracing the nation and inspiring unanimous decisions. We must not assume, however, that this is to obscure or to minimize the nature of the internal conflicts which have characterized American political life. We can hardly choose between an event and its context, though in the study of history and politics there will always be some who will ask us to do so. What we learn

from the concept of a liberal society, lacking feudalism and therefore socialism and governed by an irrational Lockianism, is that the domestic struggles of such a society have all been projected with the setting of Western liberal alignments. And here there begin to emerge, not a set of negative European correlations, but a set of very positive ones which have been almost completely neglected.

We can thus say of the right in America that it exemplifies the tradition of big propertied liberalism in Europe, a tradition familiar enough though, as I shall suggest in a moment, much still remains to be done in studying it along transnational lines. It is the tradition which embraces loosely the English Presbyterian and the English Whig, the French Girondin and the French Liberal: a tradition which hates the *ancien régime* up to a certain point, loves capitalism, and fears democracy. Occasionally, as a matter of fact, American Hamiltonianism has been called by the English term "Whiggery," though no effort has been made to pursue the comparative analysis which this label suggests.\* Similarly the European "petit-bourgeois" tradition is the starting point for an understanding of the American left. Here, to be sure, there are critical problems of identification, since one of the main things America did was to expand and transform the European "petit-

\*Because no term has been coined to describe as a whole the wealthier, conservative strand in the liberal movement I often use the term "Whig" for it in this study, which, of course, extends the technical meaning of the term very much. There is, however, a unity in social thought to this tradition which makes a common label necessary. Even in the case of the post-Civil War Republicans in the United States, where the materials seem uniquely American, it is possible to interpret them in terms of the general problem that the wealthier phase of the liberal movement faced in the West.

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bourgeois" by absorbing both the peasantry and the proletariat into the structure of his personality. It is only the beginning of comparative analysis to link up American Progressivism with the tradition of the French Jacobins and to counterparts elsewhere in Europe. But even though agrarian and proletarian factors complicate this issue enormously, bringing us for all practical purposes out of the petit-bourgeois world of Europe, the basic correlation remains a sound one.

One of the reasons these European liberal correlations have gone neglected is quite obvious once you try to make them. America represents the liberal mechanism of Europe functioning without the European social antagonisms, but the truth is, it is only through these antagonisms that we recognize the mechanism. We know the European liberal, as it were, by the enemies he has made: take them away in American fashion and he does not seem like the same man at all. This is true even of the Whig who prior to 1840 poses the easiest problem in this respect. Remove Wellington from Macaulay, and you have in essence Alexander Hamilton, but the link between the latter two is not at first easy to see. After 1840, when the American Whig gives up his Hamiltonian elitism and discovers the Horatio Alger ethos of a liberal society, discovers "Americanism," the task of identification is even harder. For while it is true that the liberals of England and France ultimately accepted political democracy, Algerism and "Americanism" were social ideologies they could hardly exploit. So that the continuing problem of a missing Toryism, which is enough to separate the American Republicans from the reactionary liberals of Victorian England and the Neo-Girondins of the Third Republic, is

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complicated further by the unique ideological shape that the Whig tradition is destined to take in a liberal society.

The American democrat, that "petit-bourgeois" hybrid of the American world, raises even more intricate questions. To take away the Social Republic from the French Montagnards changes their appearance just about as much as taking away the feudal right from the English Whigs. But the American democrat, alas, deviated sharply from the Montagnards to begin with, since in addition to being "petit-bourgeois" in their sense he was a liberal peasant and a liberal proletarian as well: indeed the whole of the nation apart from the Whig, a condition hardly vouchsafed to the Montagnards. And yet even in the face of such tremendous variations, comparative analysis can continue. We have to tear the giant figure of Jackson apart, sorting out not only the "petit-bourgeois" element of the man but those rural and urban elements which the American liberal community has transformed. Ultimately, as with the Whigs, for all of the magical chemistry of American liberal society, we are dealing with social materials common to the Western world.

That society has been a triumph for the liberal idea, but we must not assume that this ideological victory was not helped forward by the magnificent material setting it found in the New World. The agrarian and proletarian strands of the American democratic personality, which in some sense typify the whole of American uniqueness, reveal a remarkable collusion between Locke and the New World. Had it been merely the liberal spirit alone which inspired the American farmer to become capitalistically oriented, to repudiate save for a few early remnants the village organization of Europe, to produce for a market



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and even to enter capitalist occupations on the side such as logging and railroad building, then the difficulties he encountered would have been greater than they were. But where land was abundant and the voyage to the New World itself a claim to independence, the spirit which repudiated peasantry and tenantry flourished with remarkable ease. Similarly, had it merely been an aspect of irrational Lockianism which inspired the American worker to think in terms of the capitalist setup, the task would have been harder than it was.

But social fluidity was peculiarly fortified by the riches of a rich land, so that there was no small amount of meaning to Lincoln's claim in 1861 that the American laborer, instead of "being fixed to that condition for life," works for "a while," then "saves," then "hires another beginner" as he himself becomes an entrepreneur.<sup>1</sup> And even when factory industrialism gained sway after the Civil War, and the old artisan and cottage-and-mill mentality was definitely gone, it was still a Lockian idea fortified by material resources which inspired the triumph of the job mentality of Gompers rather than the class mentality of the European worker. The "petit-bourgeois" giant of America, though ultimately a triumph for the liberal idea, could hardly have chosen a better material setting in which to flourish.

But a liberal society does not merely produce old Whig and new democrat, does not merely cast a strange set of lights and shadows on them. More crucially it shapes the outcome of the struggle in which they engage. We cannot say this about the Civil War, which involved in

<sup>1</sup> The notes will be found on pages 313-20.

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any case a different alignment, because socially the Civil War was unique to America and there is no comparative material on the basis of which to analyze it. It was not, as some have said, comparable to the French and Puritan revolutions, and if we list it as one of the triumphs of nineteenth-century nationalism, Lincoln becoming a counterpart of Cavour as in some sense he undoubtedly was, we remove the issue to a different plane of comparative analysis where results are equally meager. The liberal society analysis can interpret many of the forces and ideologies that went into the war, but it is asking too much of it to account strategically for its military outcome. The picture changes, however, when we come back to the historic Whig-democrat battle which is the characteristic upshot of a liberal society. There the analysis has a lot to say about strategy.

Firstly America, by making its "petit-bourgeois" hybrid the mass of the nation, makes him unconquerable, save in two instances: when he is disorganized, as prior to Jefferson and Jackson, or when he is enchanted with the dream of becoming a Whig himself, as prior to the crash of 1929. Which is merely another way of saying that the historic Whig technique of *divide et impera* which comes out perhaps most vividly at the time of the First Reform Act and the July Revolution—of playing the mass against the *ancien régime*, the *ancien régime* against the mass, and the mass against itself—cannot work in a society where the mass embraces everything but Whiggery. This is what the Hamiltonian Federalists, who actually tried to pursue this course in America, ultimately had to learn. And this is also why, when they learned it, even their existing resemblance to European Whiggery disappeared and they

became distinctively American operators. What they learned was the Alger mechanism of enchanting the American democrat and the "Americanistic" mechanism of terrifying him, which was the bounty they were destined to receive for the European strategies of which they were deprived. For the defeat of Hamilton, so long as the economy boomed, they were bound to get the victory of McKinley. One might call this the great law of Whig compensation inherent in American politics. The record of its functioning takes up a large part of American history.

So one cannot say of the liberal society analysis that by concentrating on national unities it rules out the meaning of domestic conflict. Actually it discovers that meaning, which is obscured by the very Progressive analysis that presumably concentrates on conflict. You do not get closer to the significance of an earthquake by ignoring the terrain on which it takes place. On the contrary, that is one of the best ways of making sure that you will miss its significance. The argument over whether we should "stress" solidarity or conflict in American politics misleads us by advancing a false set of alternatives.

#### 4. *The Problem of a Single Factor*

It will be said that this is a "single factor" analysis of American history and politics, and probably the only way of meeting this charge is to admit it.<sup>x</sup> Technically we are actually dealing with two factors: the absence of feudalism and the presence of the liberal idea.<sup>x</sup> The escape from the old European order could be accompanied by other ideas, as for instance the Chartist concept which had some

effect in the settlement of Australia.<sup>x</sup> But in terms of European history itself the abstraction of the feudal force implies the natural development of liberalism, so that for all practical purposes we are dealing with a single factor.<sup>y</sup>

Now there is nothing wrong with this, provided we do not claim for our factor any more than it can actually account for on the basis of comparative analysis. It is reasonable to reject the essentially religious claims of ultimate causality that single factor theories such as those of Marx and Hobbes advance. There is no "secret" or "key" to the historical process, or if there is, we certainly cannot know it. But we must not, because of this, brand as fruitless any attempt to isolate a significant historical variable and to study it by consistently comparing cases. If we do, we shall have thrown out, along with the bath water of false monisms, the very baby of scientific analysis. Granted that a single factor cannot illuminate all situations, it can still illuminate many. And these, given what we want to know at any moment, may be very relevant indeed.

Viewed in these terms the feudal issue is one whose

<sup>x</sup> \* What is needed here is a comparative study of new societies which will put alongside the European institutions left behind the positive cultural concepts brought to the various frontier settings. There are an infinite variety of combinations possible, and an infinite variety of results. Veblen, in a sentence he never followed up, caught some of the significance of this problem when he said that "it was the fortune of the American people to have taken their point of departure from the European situation when the system of Natural Liberty was still 'obvious and simple,'" while other colonial enterprises "have had their institutional point of departure blurred with a scattering of the holdovers that were brought in again by the return wave of reaction in Europe, as well as by these later-come stirrings of radical discontent that have questioned the eternal fitness of the system of Natural Liberty itself." *What Veblen Taught*, ed. W. Mitchell (New York, 1947), pp. 368-69.

consideration in American history is long overdue. This is not only because of the chain of insights it yields, as long as the course of our national development itself, but also because without it other elements have been burdened with work which it alone can do. Consider that ancient question: the early triumph of American democracy. Turner's frontier, of course, has been advanced to explain this phenomenon but, discovering alas that frontiers are to be found in Canada where feudalism was originally imported and in Russia, historians have revolted against the Turner approach. Actually, as I have suggested on the basis of the comparative European data, the speedy victory of manhood suffrage in America was dictated by the inevitable frustration of elitist Whiggery in a liberal context. Which suggests that Turner was not wrong but, in a way he scarcely understood, half right, for how could American liberalism flourish as it did without a frontier terrain free of Old World feudal burdens? By claiming its own, in other words, the liberal society concept puts the frontier in proper perspective, dissolving both the exaggerated enthusiasms and the exaggerated hostilities that it has engendered.

It does the same thing with other factors, as for example capitalist growth. Reacting against Turner (to continue with the democratic illustration) some recent historians have pointed to the growth of industrialism and an Eastern urban proletariat to explain the swift appearance of American manhood suffrage. Certainly there were pressures here. But if we do not find them in Canada and Russia prior to Jackson, we do in England and France, and on a larger scale, so that the theory advanced to supplant Turner fares no better than his own. Indeed if we

check back to the comparative analysis yielded by the liberal society concept we see that it was the nonproletarian outlook of the early American working class, the fact that it did not frighten the mass of small property owners above it, as the Social Republic frightened the French Mountain in 1848, which saved the democratic forces of the nation from being split to the advantage of Whiggery, as they so often were in Europe. Or take the explanation from capitalist growth of the national Alger ideology after the Civil War. Capitalism was surely related to Alger, but if it produced him, why did it not do so in Germany where it was booming at the same time or in England where it boomed earlier? Actually the Alger spirit is the peculiar instinct of a Lockian world, and what capitalist growth did, once the Whigs began to articulate it, was to fortify their case. Puritanism, to shift to another well known factor, does not serve as a substitute for the liberal society concept in this case or indeed in others. If it is the titanic explanatory force that some critics found it to be, why did it not lead to an American history in England where it first appeared? The answer, of course, as Lord Morley once eloquently observed in connection with the failure of Cromwell, was that the ancient social order of England hemmed it in so that it could not permeate the national spirit as it did in the New World.

These sample instances illustrate the utility of the liberal society concept in relation to familiar problems. Though concerned with a "single factor," its effect is actually to balance distorted emphases that we have traditionally lived with in the study of American history and politics.

5. *Implications for Europe*

If Europe provides data for checking America, America provides data for checking Europe: we are dealing with a two-way proposition. So that the liberal society analysis, at the same moment it stresses the absence of the feudal factor in America, stresses its presence abroad. Modern European historians have never evolved an interpretation of their subject from precisely this point of view. To some extent, no doubt, this is because they have been no more transatlantic in their orientation than their American brethren. But there is also a superficial logical reason for this: if modern history begins with liberalism, why stress feudalism, which after all is "medieval history"? And yet, quite apart from the lessons of the American experience, is not the fallacy of this reasoning patent? Merely to state that the feudal structure was the target of modern forces is to affirm the fact, by any sophisticated logic, that it determined the shape these forces took. One hardly needs to read Mannheim to realize that the status quo determines the categories of revolution, or Hegel to realize that the thesis is not unrelated to the sort of antithesis that arises. If the feudal factor is the mother factor of modern life, how can its influence be anything less than permanent and inescapable?

Now I am not advocating here a "conservative interpretation" of European history, which will lay the ghost of the Whigs, making a hero out of Eldon and a villain out of Grey. As a purely normative matter I concede virtues in the European feudal ethos, some of which are tragically missing in America, but I am less enthusiastic about them than, say, Mr. Peter Viereck. What I have in

mind is neutral to the question of the goodness or badness of the feudal factor, which is perhaps why none of its partisans have bothered to develop it. There are "analytic" historical interpretations of a movement which, if charged with enough secular religiosity, can blend norm and fact and insure the triumph of the movement itself. Condorcet's was one of these, and so was Marx's. But it would take a lot of Hegelian magic to produce out of any analysis of the medieval influence in modern history a retrogressive apocalypse which would insure the return of the medieval spirit itself. A study of this factor, though it would illumine modern history fundamentally, would scarcely serve a partisan reactionary purpose. Indeed it might be shocking to a good Bonaldian to discover how much of feudalism went into the shaping of the sinful movements of liberalism and proletarian socialism he is wont to fight against.

\*And yet whatever its strategic value may be for conservatism, the American experience suggests that a study of modern European history from the feudal angle might yield interesting results. One of these, curiously enough, is a point of departure, not merely for the comparative study of America and Europe, but for the comparative study of European nations themselves. With the crystallization of national states, the European nations have been studied almost as independently as America itself, the idea being apparently that since the "medieval unity" had broken down there was no use preserving it in historical study. The result is that many of the most primitive correlations among the European countries, in economics and politics, have not been made. But if the "medieval unity" is found actually to be a decisive factor in

the epoch that followed it, the basis for these correlations automatically appears. Now this is not to suggest that national differences in Western Europe are not crucial. As in the case of America we must be careful to avoid useless debate over a situation and its context. To stress feudalism in Europe is no more to deny that wide variations take place within it than to stress liberalism in America is to deny that wide variations take place within that. One can still emphasize the differences between Burke and Haller, or Jaurès and Bernstein, just as one can still emphasize the differences between Bryan and William Howard Taft. Indeed, were it not for the fact that a uniform liberalism does not see itself at all, while a uniform feudalism sees itself considerably by virtue of the antagonisms it engenders, one might even argue for a certain similarity between America and Europe on this very score. Here Locke has been so basic that we have not recognized his significance, there Filmer. And the two issues dovetail: to discover the one yields the perspective for discovering the other.

Needless to say, I have not tried in this book to explore in special detail the European pattern. But as one tries to piece together the nature of American liberal society, one cannot help being astonished at the small degree to which the relevant European relationships have been organized for study. This is less true in the simple matter of social movements than in the case of their interplay with each other, and less true on the latter count in connection with the great revolutions than with the periods which followed them. We have had a number of studies of the "Enlightenment" and the "Reaction" and "Liberalism," though it is astonishing, when one tries to break the is-

sue down into a matter like the comparison between French Radicalism and English Liberal Reform, how little work really is available. But when we come to comparative dynamic analyses such as the correlation between the First Reform Act and the July Revolution, we are in a poverty-stricken area indeed. It is interesting that such analyses should primarily have been focused on the Puritan, French, and even the Russian revolutions, the assumption being that because "great revolutions" took place in these instances there is a larger ground for comparative study. Actually these revolutionary situations vividly foreshadow the dynamic alignments of the relatively peaceful periods which follow them, and if it is reasonable to relate 1642 to 1789, it is just as reasonable to relate 1830 to 1832.

But what has been lacking has been the common point of departure, which the American liberal experience, by contrast, supplies at once. Indeed one is struck with another similarity between the problem of America and Western Europe in the realm of self-analysis. Historically European hegemony has provided much the same atmosphere for European analysis that American isolation has provided for American analysis: the common environment could be left inarticulate and internal contrasts stressed, as if reality itself were being studied. But when the big wide world rushes in on America and Europe, not to speak of their rushing in on each other, is not this happy arrogance fated by a similar logic to end in both cases?

#### 6. *The Progressive Scholarship*

In American social studies we still live in the shadow of the Progressive era. Historians have openly assailed

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Beard, challenging economic motivations here and there and often transforming "radicals" into "conservatives." But after all is said and done Beard somehow stays alive, and the reason for this is that, as in the case of Marx, you merely demonstrate your subservience to a thinker when you spend your time attempting to disprove him. (The way to fully refute a man is to ignore him for the most part, and the only way you can do this is to substitute new fundamental categories for his own, so that you are simply pursuing a different path.) Such categories represent the only hope for a genuine escape from the pervasive frustration that the persistence of the Progressive analysis of America has inspired.

It is not unreasonable to suspect that our own time will discover such categories and that they may well lie in the relation of America to other nations. Everyone knows the old saw about each age rewriting history from its own angle, and everyone agrees that the peculiar angle of our own age is the involvement of America with the world. What is really wrong with the Progressive analysis, insofar as the questions we want answered today are concerned, is not that it is Progressive but that it is American. And here there is an interesting paradox, for one of the advances that the Progressives thought they were making lay in the explosion of the old nationalist history, what John Spencer Bassett called the "patriotic" school of historians. No doubt they did corrode many of the premises of this school. But at the same time they carried on a profound nationalism of their own. Even the "objectivists" among American historical writers, who rejected theses of any kind, did the same thing, for they did not, as Jameson urged, look at American history "from the standpoint

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of the outsider." Rankian fact-gathering is not the same as getting "outside" your subject. The truth is, the American historian at practically every stage has functioned quite inside the nation: he has tended to be an erudite reflection of the limited social perspectives of the average American himself.

Where then lay the nativism of Beard and J. Allen Smith? It is not simply in the fact that they did not attempt the European correlations. This hid something deeper: their theory was a projection of the Progressive social orientation, which was compact of America's irrational liberalism. The agitation of Brandeis and Wilson was the agitation of Western Liberal Reform altered by the fact that, fighting only Whiggery, rather than Toryism and socialism too, it was able no more than Whiggery to perceive the nature of its liberalism. It was as if Lloyd George were fighting only the reactionary members of the Liberal party who, in any case, had no Tory party to enter if they were dissatisfied with him. Hence, with the whole scheme of liberal unity blacked out, Whiggery became for the Progressives a frightful "conservatism," whereas it itself became "progressive" or "radical," a set of terms which meant nothing insofar as Western history of Western political alignments as a whole went. Armed with these intellectual tools, and as blind as the Progressives themselves to the natural liberalism of the nation, Beard and Smith went back to the origins of American history, splitting it up into two warring camps, discovering a "social revolution" in the eighteenth century, and in general making it impossible to understand the American liberal community. Their treatment of the Constitution may have lacked the piety of the "patriotic" historians,

but it was as "American" as anything those historians developed. Indeed one might even argue that the others, by stressing a kind of happy national family, were a shade closer to the Lockian solidarity of the nation, which indeed was flourishing as never before in a commonly accepted "Americanism."

The Bentley group analysis, which was to have so great an influence on our political science, was a variation of the same process: the projection of irrational "Americanism" into the study of America. It was not, to be sure, a political weapon, as the Beardian analysis was, but its elevation of peculiar American phenomena into absolute categories of political analysis was of the same kind as we found there. A multiplicity of groups flourishes in a liberal society, habitually determining the outcome of policy, since class lines of the European type are not present. To interpret America in terms of the groups it peculiarly evolves is to miss the nature of the national liberal world as badly as to interpret it in terms of "conservative" and "radical." Had the disciples of Bentley tried to apply his analysis to the Dreyfus Affair as they did to the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, they would hardly have found the procedure so easy, although of course they could always call classes "groups" if they wanted to.\*

\*Being reflections of America's irrational liberalism, these analyses cannot illuminate the questions of domestic freedom and international policy which that liberalism in our own time poses. One cannot help noticing the sudden efflorescence in the last few years of historical anthologies of the memoirs of foreign travelers who came to America

\* For a wider discussion of the Progressive scholarship, see Chapter Nine.

—some of them excellent. A hunger has finally appeared for getting outside the national experience. But is it not a sad commentary on our historical writing that, when the nation wants really to see itself, about all that can be offered are the fleeting impressions of foreigners who may have stayed in Cincinnati for a day or two? Surely the American historian would not be satisfied with such impressions in regard to the fur trade; he would demand mountains of evidence. In this connection one cannot help noticing an interesting fact: no school of American historians has ever come out of the well known work of the greatest foreign critic America ever had—Tocqueville. We find in him a series of deep insights into the American liberal community. And yet while American students have lavished unlimited praise on Tocqueville, have indeed edited and re-edited him, they have deserted him when they have come to serious work, gladly substituting the Beardian notion of social conflict for his famous notion of equality. They have lived a happily divided life on this score. But given the nationalist forces which have shaped American studies, could anything different really be expected?

There were many comforts in the old Progressive history which the liberal society analysis can never claim. The Progressives, for one thing, always had an American hero available to match any American villain they found, a Jefferson for every Hamilton. Which meant that in their demonology the nation never really sinned: only its inferior self did, its particular will, to use the language of Rousseau. The analyst of American liberalism is not in so happy a spot, for concentrating on unities as well as conflict, he is likely to discover on occasion a national villain, such as the tyrannical force of Lockian sentiment, whose

treatment requires a new experience for the whole country rather than the insurgence of a part of it. Actually there was amid all the smoke and flame of Progressive historical scholarship a continuous and almost complacent note of reassurance. A new Jefferson would arise as he had always arisen before. The "reactionaries" would be laid low again. Needless to say, when you are dealing with problems inspired by an unprecedented set of world forces, you cannot take this line. So that the liberal society analyst is destined in two ways to be a less pleasing scholar than the Progressive: he finds national weaknesses and he can offer no absolute assurance on the basis of the past that they will be remedied. He tends to criticize and then shrug his shoulders, which is no way to become popular, especially in an age like our own. But even if there were not an integrity to criticism which ought to be kept inviolate at any cost, this mood is not without constructive virtue. It reminds us of a significant fact: that instead of recapturing our past, we have got to transcend it. As for a child who is leaving adolescence, there is no going home again for America.