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# Storybook Truths about America

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Fifty years ago Louis Hartz set out to tell the "storybook truth" about America. Despite being almost risibly dense, *The Liberal Tradition in America* neatly captures the popular folklore – this is what you might hear at the Chamber of Commerce. Meanwhile, academics are often flatly contemptuous: Hartz mangled history, muffed quotations, and did not bother with rules of evidence. Even so, for better and for worse, his version of an all-American fable lives on as an enigmatic, controversial, and enduring political science classic.[1]

I start with a short summary of Hartz's argument, which I then measure against two contemporary issues that demonstrate both *The Liberal Tradition's* apparent force and its limits. In Section III, I survey the critics and then turns to the book's great strength. In Part IV, I examine Hartz's most iconoclastic argument, his analysis of slavery and the liberal tradition. The chapters on slavery are shrewd and daring failures; there are many different storybook truths about America and in the antebellum south the liberal myth is overshadowed by stories of race and religion. In Part V, I elaborate one of the important alternative American stories – morality as a "storybook truth." Finally, I conclude by suggesting why *The Liberal Tradition* has been both an analytic boon (it pushes us to ask questions we rarely ask) and a burden (it constrains historical studies of both culture and liberalism) for students of American political development.

## I. THE STORYBOOK TRUTH

Hartz takes his story directly from Tocqueville. In fact, the entire *Liberal Tradition* pivots around a quotation Hartz puts in the frontispiece and repeats or references to open five of his first six chapters: "Americans attained democracy without the sufferings of a democratic revolution. They were born free instead of becoming so."[2] Of course, 'that is not exactly what Tocqueville wrote. *Democracy in America* declared Americans "born equal instead of becoming so." Subsequent editions corrected the mistake but the error remains more faithful to the Hartz thesis.

Early Americans, goes the story, escaped feudal and clerical oppressions when they left the Old World behind. Here, in America, they were born free; they did not have to push aside the old hierarchies – the barons or the bishops – to get ahead. The land and its riches awaited them. Any man could succeed with a little capital and a lot of work. Born free, Americans did not need a revolutionary tradition; unlike the Europeans serfs, Americans never had to march shoulder to shoulder against an entrenched establishment to win the right of upward mobility. Without a revolutionary tradition, Americans never developed a reactionary one. Right from the start, it was every man for himself (the old myth gets a bit shakier if you try to apply it to women, but that would be getting ahead of the story). From this mythic start, America developed its hegemonic, oppressive, unyielding, irrational liberalism, unchallenged from either left or right.

American liberalism, continues Hartz, would eventually run into every nook and cranny of the political culture. Our liberalism – as we shall see, Hartz's version of liberalism emphasizes economic markets far more than political rights – begins with an unshakeable faith in American social mobility. Every man can be a Horatio Alger hero. Hard workers acquire property, wealth, and status (in the Alger books, the action stops at regular intervals while the hero totes up his savings as he rises from nothing). Since anyone with pluck can make his way up, there is no room for med-

I dedicate this article to the memory of many long conversations with J. David Greenstone. I am most grateful for comments by Brian Glenn, Dan Ehlke, and Deborah Stone.

1. Rogan Kersh reports that Louis Hartz remains a standard work in most classes in American Political Development. See "The Growth of American Political Development," *Perspectives on Politics,* 3 (2005): 335–45.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *de la Democratie en Amerique* (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1981), II:130; for English version, see *Democracy in America,* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), II:2.3: 509. For Hartz's quotations of and references to the passage, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955) 5, 35, 68–69, 89, 146.


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dling government. Collective action (or its despised apotheosis, socialism) would only muck up capitalism's great test of personal virtue. As Ted Turner memorably updated that American metric, "money is how we keep score in life."

Americans, concludes Hartz, fiercely embrace this liberalism regardless of their own situation. A long literary tradition joins Hartz and reflects on the market's crushing embrace. George Babbitt is only the most famous conformist, stifled by small town pressure to embrace the-all American values of "zip" and "optimism" and "get ahead." The market – always the market – measures Americans. The myth runs deeper than reason or self-interest or logic and reduces the powerful American Democrat into a dithering Hamlet, as Hartz put it, terrified of his own power. Even critics absorb the essential liberal yardstick. As Carol Nackenoff points out, Thomas Frank managed a best seller around the puzzle, why won't poor people in Kansas throw aside all this government-bashing, Red-State nonsense and actually vote their economic self interest? Hartz offers the classic answer.[3]

Hartz reserves his hottest prose for a warning that runs through *The Liberal Tradition:* The American Way – regularly, predictably – veers from merely stifling to overtly repressive. Challenges to the liberal tradition, to America's favorite storybook truth, regularly provoke an ugly backlash. Alternatives are not just wrong but "un-American," dangerous, evil. When a liberal community faces military and ideological pressure from without," comments Hartz, "it transforms eccentricity into sin."[4]

Does this storybook truth hold up after a half-century? The answer is clear: Yes and No. It depends on where and how deeply you look.

## II. THE STORYBOOK TRUTH IN TODAY'S WORLD

How do you evaluate a myth? One way is to hold it up to contemporary politics and judge the fit. The Hartzian thesis draws its staying power partially because it offers such a neat, simple, popular explanation for some of America's great political fights. In this section, I measure *The Liberal Tradition* against two contemporary policies – one that seems to support the argument and one that appears to refute it.

### Liberal Hegemony and Health Care Reform?

Compared to other nations, Americans have terrible health. Girls in the United States are born with a life expectancy that ranks twenty-eighth in the world. Male babies weigh in at thirty-first – in a dead tie with Belize and Brunei. Among the thirteen wealthiest countries, the United States ranks last (or nearly last) in almost every way we measure health: infant mortality, low birth weight, life expectancy, teenage death rates, and on and on.[5]

There are a lot of explanations for this dismal data but most include the 44 million Americans with no health insurance (another thirty million have insurance that is flatly inadequate). For fifty years, the left has proposed a solution – national health insurance. After all, argue proponents, the United States implemented universal insurance for people over 65 (through Medicare, introduced in 1966) and American elders rapidly rose to the top of the cross-national health comparisons. Every other industrial nation, continues the argument, insures that everyone can get basic health care.

American leaders who actually propose national health insurance, however, quickly find themselves embroiled in the fight of their lives. Conservative Senator Howard Taft (R–OH) set the pattern back in 1946 when he responded to President Harry Truman's national health insurance proposal by leading the Republicans out of the hearing room loudly proclaiming that they would not be a party to socialism.[6] The two most sustained efforts to win the reform – Harry Truman in 1946 and Bill Clinton in 1994 – helped stoke a ferocious backlash; both times, the Democrats lost control of Congress (both houses) in the next election.

American health politics seems to offer compelling testimony: Louis Hartz lives! Here is – or, on the surface, appears to be – exhibit A in the story of The World's Most Liberal Nation. Despite serious troubles in health care, Americans stubbornly cling to the Horatio Alger story: People make their own way, negotiating markets without help from a weak and underdeveloped state (that infamous, international welfare laggard). American public policies reverberate with a deep suspicion of the government and, especially, the welfare policies designed to uplift slackers who fall on hard times.

Today, most social scientists have grown skeptical of this purely cultural explanation for the failure of health reform. Instead, they look for more complex explanations rooted in America's constitutional checks and balances – a closer look suggests that the

3. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* chap. 5; Carol Nackenoff, "Locke, Alger, and Atomistic Individualism Fifty Years Later: Revisiting Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America,*"
*Studies in American Political Development* 19 (2005).

4. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 12

5. See James A. Morone and Lawrence Jacobs, ed., *Healthy Wealthy and Fair: Health Care for a Good Society* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

6. Truman, in particular, was inundated with letters from both organized lobbies and ordinary citizens. As one letter writer put the common theme: "We, the people of the United States should put back on the robe of Americanism and do away with the saying 'Let the Government do it,' or in other words, 'Let Communism and Socialism do it.'. . . Let us do away with government-controlled Power Education and Health bills. . . . These bills are pure Socialism." (O. J. Zollars, letter to President Truman, 17 Jun. 1949. Harry Truman archives, 286-A, Vertical File: Health Care Policy).

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design of our political institutions explains at least as much as our antistatist ideology (more on this in the following paragraphs). At the same time, the Hartzian story is almost axiomatic in the media and among the public; the Clinton health reform failed, according to the popular wisdom, because Americans basically distrust their government.[7]

Ironically, this flamboyant pedant from Harvard – often lambasted by scholars – precisely captured the popular mythology: We are descended from a race of hardy pioneers who set out on their own and succeeded or failed by talent and hard work. Across America, local Chambers of Commerce stoke the rags to riches trope with heartfelt Horatio Alger Awards. Americans – even many poor Americans – deplore government handouts.[8] New forms of state authority – even, at times, for the extension of narrow benefits to broad constituencies – provoke the battle cry of the American founding: A tyrannous state threatens the rights of free people.

Although social scientists currently offer rich and subtle alternatives to Hartz's storybook truth, we have scarcely advanced his understanding of what Americans *believe* – that is, of the prime American storybook truth. Nor have we developed satisfying explanations for just why these mythologies have such a powerful hold on the popular imagination.

### The Liberal Tradition and Our Jails

Another policy area points to the limits of *The Liberal Tradition*. By 2003, the United States had 2.1 million people in prison or jail and almost 7 million people in the criminal justice system (in prison, on parole, or under probation). That sums to one out of every thirty-three adults. Our incarceration rate – 715 people in jail for every 100,000 Americans – runs roughly five times higher than that of other industrial nations. Our North American neighbors are far more typical – 116 (per 100,000) in Canada and 169 in Mexico. There is another twist to the data. Zero in on black men and the incarceration rate flies up to over 7,000 per 100,000. One out of ten black Americans is caught up in the criminal justice system. Nor, for the most part, does the United States have more crime than other industrial nations. The very high incarceration rates do not fit the usual cultural picture. Americans may prize the picture of an unbridled cowboy culture, but their public policies tolerate far less deviance than other western countries.[9]

Clearly, Louis Hartz's theory misses something big about contemporary America. A weak government? Nonsense. Only an unusually muscular state could push 3 percent of its adult population into the criminal justice system. Liberalism? Forget the classic distinction between a public sphere and a private realm protected by rights. Here, the personal is profoundly political. The American criminal code – with its harsh prohibitions on drug use, for example – suggests a national culture with a low tolerance for, well, liberal social attitudes. Hartz did suggest that under extreme pressure American leaders would turn from "the irritating figure of the bourgeois gossip" into "the frightening figure of . . . a Senator McCarthy."[10] But Hartz's theory – a Lockean liberal community racked by occasional spasms of irrational repression – does not easily stretch to fit a twenty-five-year project devoted to building a powerful, sprawling, intrusive criminal justice state.

The crime case suggests a limit to American liberalism. The American Constitution spells out an expansive (and often expanded) set of personal rights. Elaborate institutional checks make it very difficult to win contested policies. Yet policymakers push aside those rights and checks when images of evil – of bad or dangerous people – intrude on American politics. How does a liberal nation strip a fellow citizen of rights? They construct him or her as a threat, as evil. The long line of dangerous people includes witches, Africans, slaveholders, Irish, Catholics, drinkers, drug peddlers, a black "underclass," Joe Camel, and Muslims bearing bombs. Each of these threats – and many others – provoked distinctly illiberal rules and prohibitions. Construct saloons as evil, for example, and Americans overlook their Lockean liberalism, legislate Prohibition, and strip an entire industry of its perfectly legal property.

Hartz got something profoundly right about America's competitive capitalism. By the same token, he missed the great struggle over the American Other. Liberalism may be a critical part of political culture, but it operates within boundaries set by a great moral dialectic, by an enduring clash between us and a constantly reconstructed them.

How did Hartz miss all that? The answer lies in the historical moment, 1955, when *The Liberal Tradition* first appeared. The civil rights movement had not yet projected racial conflict back into national (white) consciousness. Immigration, severely restricted between 1929 and 1965, no longer provoked serious cultural fears. Rather, Hartz wrote when the great American other was a communist. Like so many intellectuals in his generation, Hartz was deeply shaken by the great red scare. In a sense, this was Liberalism's great witch-

7. For a fine range of views on the Clinton plan and its failure, see the symposium in *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 20 (1995).

8. For a quite dramatic analysis of this phenomenon, see Jennifer Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), esp. chap. 4.

9. Data from Fox Butterfield, "U.S Correctional Population Hits New High," *New York Times,* 26 Jul. 2004; and Connie Cass, "1 in 75 men were in prison or jail in 2003," *Associated Press* 26 Jul. 2004. For discussion, see James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003): 455–64.

10. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 10–12.

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hunt. Communists violated the faith in economic mobility; socialist aspirations were the antithesis of the Horatio Alger hero. Hartz concluded that violations of the liberal tradition (socialism!) are what got Americans crying "sinner" and burning books.

But communists are not the only American subversive, not even a typical one. The red scare stands as just one in a long line of illiberal deliriums reaching back to the early seventeenth century. And the great American fears have generally turned, not on threats to liberal market capitalism but on images of gender, race, and aliens. In the end, Hartz's storybook truth is incomplete. There are other American myths.[11]

## III. JUDGING HARTZ

In this section, I take a more direct look at Hartz's critics and defenders.

### Critics

Hartz takes a regular drubbing from scholars, especially historians. To begin, they are not well disposed to his mythic version of early America – it is just too simplistic to imagine a new world without feudal and clerical oppressions. After all, a prestigious minister, Increase Mather, justified the official start of the Salem Witch Trials and, eventually, called for their end; the inexperienced governor, Sir William Phipps, followed Mather's lead from start to finish. What was that if not a "clerical oppression?" Or what about the slave regime powerfully defended by southern churchmen? Despite a furious Hartzian exegesis (in chapters 5 and 6), it also looks very much like "feudal and clerical oppression." And what about women? Shouldn't a good national myth go beyond those books for boys? A real account of early America, insist historians, would have something to say about slaves, indentured servants, Amerindians, and the Spanish colonies. It would speak to American religion. Bring in this fuller cast, expand the range of the inquiry, and the oppressive liberal consensus (that Tocqueville and Hartz's traced to America's mythic foundations) shatters into a set of deep and enduring conflicts.

Moreover, historians are, by training, ill-disposed to an argument that extracts a single analytical theme – one that the actors themselves would not recognize – across American history. Every moment has both unique and universal characteristics. Historians generally look for what is unique in each event; they dig into the details and keep a close eye on the narrative line. In contrast, social scientists search for common themes and generalizations and are more prone to abstractions and theories. Hartz practically taunts historians with his elusive mix of theorists and mythology, characters and events, irony and scorn. James Kloppenberg speaks more politely than most historical critics when he calls Hartz: "flat, static, vague, fuzzy . . . and wrong."[12]

Across the quad, most political scientists are not much kinder. After all, what does it mean to argue, Americans *believe* in a liberal ideology? The political scientist will want to see the marginals – what percentage believe this myth and under what conditions? Across the analytic spectrum, postmodern theorists will want to interrogate just what Hartz means by "believe." The whole notion of an undifferentiated American point of view – a consensus rooted in a kind of historical dream (that was at best, problematic for women, blacks, natives and immigrants) – is far too simple to do much serious explanatory work in contemporary political science.

Moreover, political scientists quite rightly question the methods. Hartz has no interest at all in political institutions; all his explanatory eggs ultimately lie in that one simple basket – the oppressive consensus that flows from alleged absence of feudal and clerical oppressions. Even where the Hartzian case seems to fit the facts, it remains, at best, incomplete. For example, we have just seen that health care policy seems tailor-made for *The Liberal Tradition:* an exceptional American distrust of government leads to the unique absence of national health insurance. However, most contemporary scholars are not satisfied with that. Ideas – however important, however forcefully expressed – have not been enough to deflect Americans from national health insurance. After all, if we had been playing by Westminster Parliamentary rules, Harry Truman would have won national health insurance back in 1946 (or, after successfully standing for reelection on precisely this issue, in 1949). Under Western European governing procedures, health reform would have come to the United States roughly when most other industrial democracies introduced the program and a full quarter-century before the leftists to our north would get around to it. As Sven Steinmo and Jon Watts sum up the failure to enact national health care: "It's the Institutions, Stupid."[13]

11. The outstanding statement of multiple traditions comes from Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). Here I point beyond his difference—liberal versus illiberal ascriptive—and look toward entirely different cultural axes—notably, religion and morality—for the American constructions of us and them. For further discussion, see James Morone, "The Other's America: Reflections on Rogers Smith's *Civic Ideals,*" *Studies in American Political Development* 13 (1999): 186–97.

12. James T. Kloppenber, "From Hartz to Tocqueville: Shifting the Focus from Liberalism to Democracy in America," in *The Democratic Expermiment,* ed. Meg Jacobs, William Novack, and Julian Zelizar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Universeity Press, 2003), 352–53.

13. For a fine version of the institutional argument in action, see T. R. Marmor, "The Politics of Medicare" (New York: Aldine, 2000), chaps. 2–4. For an elegant account of the significance of ideas versus institutions, see Brian Glenn, "God and the Red Umbrella, *Connecticut Insurance Law Journal* 10 (2004): 277–307. I develop the point of this paragraph in *The Democratic Wish* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), chap. 8. The classic statement remains Sven Steinmo and Jon Watts, "It's the Institutions Stupid," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 20 (1995): 329–72.

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In short, the liberal consensus is weakly rooted in American history. It overlooks the great American culture conflicts over race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. It ignores crucial analytic categories. It imposes a static frame on a dynamic subject. It is reductive, superficial and simple. Is there anything to salvage here? Yes, I believe there is.

### What Hartz Got Right

J. David Greenstone devoted most of his brilliant career to a spirited wrestle with Louis Hartz. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein, Greenstone reread the liberal tradition as a "boundary condition" rather than a causal argument: "The liberal tradition is a complex interweave of political thought and behavior that keeps American political development within clearly liberal channels." Hartz's storybook truth is really a shorthand, argues Greenstone, for a shifting combination of words and deeds, culture and behavior, institutions and beliefs. Taken in total, they illustrate a distinctive and exceptional influence – a steady pressure rather than a definitive outcome – on American politics. And who would deny the powerful liberal current running through American time?[14]

Hartz focused on political rights a good deal less than most liberal theorists. Instead, Hartzian liberalism almost fiercely underscores market economics. Hartz described, first and foremost, an unquestioned (and, to most Americans, unquestionable) ideological regime that fostered robust economic competition at any cost. In this way, Louis Hartz contrasts with almost every other 1950s liberal who described an American consensus. The others almost invariably pictured an American commitment to personal liberty and private rights bolstered by market capitalism; in contrast, Hartz saw an irrational obsession with market capitalism that, at times, subverted private rights and personal liberty.[15]

For Hartz, the American icon was Horatio Alger, the national nightmare was socialism, and the essential attitude was "every man for himself" with every man tested by the unforgiving market. When Emerson eulogized Henry David Thoreau, he grieved in perfect Hartzian pitch: "I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. . . . He was the captain of a huckleberry-party."[16]

Perhaps a different bit of Tocqueville would have gotten Hartz deeper into his central story: "They dream only about changing or increasing their wealth." "Money is the god of the United States," added Tocqueville's traveling companion, Gustave De Beaumont, "as glory is the god of France. . . . If one is born to think, he thinks," concluded de Beaumont; "if he is born to make money, he does not think."[17]

When Hartz wrote, a half-century ago, capitalism was central to the American way. (Recall, for example, the celebrated kitchen debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev.) The next two decades brought sustained challenge in the forms of race issues, riots, antipoverty programs, and oil crisis. Today, however, market capitalism is as formidable – as legitimate, as apparently *American* – as the day Hartz published *The Liberal Tradition*.

On this ground – on the force (and the dangers) of market thinking – Hartz was formidable, radical, and prescient. He kept the American economic gospel at the center of his *Liberal Tradition*. In a sense, his angry tone presaged the revolt against capitalism of the 1960s; and his gloomy analysis about inexorable market liberalism predicts that rebellion's failure. Indeed, his analysis of American market thinking as deep, irrational, and irresistible seems distinctly prophetic fifty years after he published this pessimistic book.

Today, the market culture seems to touch every feature of American society. It transforms our countryside (no fatuous French subsidies for small family farms here), empties our downtowns (Wal-Mart offers lower prices than the local merchants), and even challenges our universities (as sovereign consumers spurn the old core curriculum for something more practical, such as courses in business and law). Moreover, market ideology (sometimes mixed with distinctly illiberal racial constructions) carries a formidable policy resonance. It attacks programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children and pushes mom out the door into a low-wage job; work is good – indeed, morally superior – however hard or unrewarding the job and whatever the consequences for the kids. National health insurance proposals, in their turn, give way to private health care accounts (for Republicans) or a health care consumer's "bill of rights" (the Democrats); both are profoundly liberal, market driven projects that present a formidable contrast to the collective social vision embedded in publicly financed health programs (which, like good market liberals, we have always tagged "compulsory insurance"). The solution to budget deficits? Outsource public functions to private companies that will be "disciplined" into great efficiency by the market. These kinds of policy propositions – fiercely contested in most industrial countries – slip easily into mainstream American political discourse.

Contemporary market variations match, and, perhaps, outstrip, any thing Louis Hartz described. The

14. J. David Greenstone, "Political Culture and American Political Development: Liberty, Union and the Liberal bipolarity," *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986): 1-49, qtd. 17.

15. For my analysis of the consensus tradition, see Morone, *Democratic Wish,* 19–23.

16. Emerson quoted in Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1–2.

17. Tocqueville, *Democratie en Amerique,* II:57 (*Democracy in America,* 462); Gustave de Beaumont, *Marie: or Slavery in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 108.

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current economic culture has developed a kind of cult around the idea of obtaining the lowest possible price at any (social) cost. The Republican majority has also rediscovered another popular urge: lowering taxes as the solution to almost every policy ill. Tax cuts score a kind of liberal trifecta: They starve a despised state of revenues, stimulate (and celebrate) private economic action, and replace collective action with individualism. Louis Hartz cut straight to the contemporary heart of the matter: "Here, then, is the master assumption of American political thought . . . the assumption from which all of the American attitudes discussed in this essay flow: the reality of atomistic social freedom."[18]

In fact, market ideology now leaps beyond American borders and turns unabashedly triumphalist as it touts the American way. From this perspective, cultural issues only bog people down in ancient debates; every people can put aside their culture wars, work hard, and get ahead. A new kind of manifest destiny is at play. Promulgated by industrious America, irresistible free markets will liberate whole regions and force even the most repressive nations to acquiesce to progress. The contemporary economic narrative reserves an especially skeptical chapter for Western Europe. Those coddled peoples will finally learn to stand up to labor unions, demand more from workers, lower taxes, and abandon their bloated social welfare benefits. The American press regularly cheers the end of the long, lazy, European vacations. The point is always the same: match America's extraordinary market culture and prosper; resist and get left in the economic dust. Everyone can – and should – become liberal in the robust Hartzian sense of the word.[19]

Back home, contemporary America seems to have embarked on a second gilded age. Although our raw economic distribution is typical of industrial nations, we do not use the state to redistribute income as much as other nations. Consequently American society is far more unequal than most wealthy nations, the population is both richer and poorer.[20] However, the poorer American majority remains, as Hartz put it, "an amiable shepherd dog kept forever on a lion's leash." No democratic mob "overburdens the inferior [wealthy] number" with high taxes as Madison had feared. On the contrary, it takes something roughly like Hartz's gut deep Lockean liberalism to yield an antitax populism that cheers the repeal of an estate tax paid by only the wealthiest 2 percent of the population.[21]

In short, the America that Hartz described lives on – more powerfully, even irrationally, liberal than ever. The Horatio Alger novels, with their young, virtuous boys striving indefatigably upward, still make a brilliant symbol for the culture. And his explanation for the origins of the American way – the hearty race of free pioneers – expresses the enduring popular mythology.

Still, in the end, Hartz uses nothing more than a popular myth to explain the origins of America's market culture. Historical studies have gone far beyond Hartz in exploring how and why the American regime developed as it did. Moreover, every nation has many, often competing, historical myths and cultural signs. Contemporary scholars investigating the roots of American ideology and culture would have much more to say about Calvinism (and the culture of capitalism), the Constitution (and its checks and balances), nineteenth-century courts (with their own kind of belated feudalism), early democracy and mass mobilizations (throwing over efficient public administration for party spoils), slavery, abolition, labor, the (often contested) gender spheres, nativism, and much more.

We can see what Hartz missed as well as what he got right by digging into one of the eras that he analyzed. In the next section, I weigh *The Liberal Tradition's* analysis of "the Feudal dream of the South."

## IV. THE LIBERAL TRADITION IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

Nothing illustrates the power and the limits of *The Liberal Tradition* better than Hartz's fervid effort to cope with slavery and its defenders. There is a great deal at stake for Hartz. On its face, the antebellum South looks like a kind of American feudalism (and one firmly shored up by clerical authority). Inconveniently, the region with the apparently neo-feudal past is the one with the most flourishing Hartzian liberalism today; no region is more staunchly antistatist, antiunion, antisocialist, or pro-market. This situation raises a powerful challenge to the central argument: Freedom from feudal and clerical authority in early America does not appear to foster a more anti-statist political culture now. Rather, compare American regions and just the reverse seems true.

Hartz's analytic strategy is to argue that the pro-slavery project was not feudal at all but liberal at the

18. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 62.

19. See, for example, Mark Landler's provocatively titled, "Slaves for Vacation: Europe Ponders the Meaning of Life" *New York Times,* 15 Aug. 2004, 4.1. The call out captures the heart of the story: "Well remember the time between 1950 and 2000 as a kind of paradise." A summary of the mid summer news in *The Week* includes, among its dispatches from foreign capitals: "Anger over Blair Vacation" ('he was taking a whole month while "most Britons take a more modest week or two") and the French "anti-work ethic" (the average French worker works about 300 hours less each year than the average American worker") (*The Week,* 3 Sep. 2004, 8).

20. Lawrence Jacobs and James Morone, "Prospering in the Age of Global Markets," James Morone and Lawrence Jacobs, eds., *Healthy, Wealthy and Fair.*

21. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 129; James Madison, *Federalist 10;* Ian Shapiro and Michael Graetz, *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

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core. (In this section, he subtly morphs his vision of liberalism – slightly more emphasis on political rights, slightly less on economic markets.) He almost pulls it off. In the process, Hartz demonstrates the extraordinary power of American liberalism; however, he also shows us where it runs up against insurmountable barriers. The Hartzian argument fails on what is, today, familiar ground: race and religion.

## A Liberal Thread?

Before beginning his case, Hartz sizes up the pro-slavery argument – a "wild," "weird," "mass of agonies," "well nigh berserk." On its face, this "mass of agonies" looks nothing at all like Lockean liberalism. On the contrary, as the pro-slavery argument developed after 1830 (in response to radical abolition), its proponents developed the most ferocious attack on liberalism in American intellectual history. Southern theorists lined up to blast Jefferson's idea that all men are created equal: "ridiculously absurd" (Governor Henry Hammond); "a sentimental phrase . . . palpably false" (William Harper); "sentimental French philosophy" – destined to drown all France in blood (W. Gilmore Simms); "the architect of ruin . . . useless, if not dangerous" (George Fitzhugh). As Hartz acknowledges, slavery's defenders explicitly repudiated John Locke and his liberalism and began, instead, to embrace Edmund Burke. Societies, they argued, develop slowly through the ages. Slavery was rooted deep in southern soil and immediate abolition – like any other rush to revolution – could yield nothing but terror, blood, and annihilation.[22]

And yet, Hartz is onto something. There *is* a liberal thread that runs tenuously through the defense of slavery. It appears as a sustained theme at two crucial points in the argument: why slavery is good for black people and how it improves the whites (although Hartz himself only argues latter).

## "A Positive Good for Slaves"

The first generation of slavery apologists took great pains to portray slavery as "a positive good" for "the Africans" themselves. The slaves arrived here, John Calhoun told the Senate in 1837, "in a low, degraded and savage condition." The stewardship of the southern masters had lifted them up. "Never before has the black race attained a condition so civilized and so improved . . . physically, morally, and intellectually." Slavery, added John H. Van Evrie, a New York physician, was part of "a divine plan for promoting the general progress of civilization and elevating . . . humanity."[23]

Gilmore Simms, a South Carolina novelist and one-term Representative, explained God's deal with the masters:

> The slaveholders of the south, having the moral and physical guardianship of an ignorant and irresponsible people under their control, are the great moral conservators. . . . Providence has placed [the slave] in our hands, for his good, and has paid us from his labor for our guardianship.[24]

The stewardship argument eventually hit an awkward snag. If African Americans were flourishing under all this tutelage, what was to stop them from rising till they were fit for freedom? Simms, for example, got all tangled up in this issue. "Taught by our schools and made strong by our training, the Negroes of our southern states may arrive at [a] . . . condition . . . such as would enable [them] to go forth out of bondage." (The original version of the piece had been even stronger; Simms had "doubted not . . . that the time will come.") In a remarkable admission, Simms wonders if perhaps, "like Pharaoh, we too shall prove unwilling to give up our bondmen." By the end of a long paragraph, he has scrambled back to safety: No, no, he writes, "I do not believe that he will ever be other than a slave."[25]

But back in his analytic snarl, Simms had stumbled into the framework of all-American individualism. Even in the thick of the repressive pro-slavery project, a flash of liberal rights and upward mobility glimmered briefly between the lines. The early apologists simply could not resist the vertical metaphors of American liberalism. Steady training, hard work, and moral guidance might yield – What? Success? Mobility? Freedom? Well, no, nothing but endless generations of slavery. On one level, it was exactly as Hartz claimed: an argument at war with itself. The apologists literally had to write their way past their own liberal frameworks and metaphors.

Eventually, some slavery apologists would solve these ambiguities by slamming the door on the slave's humanity. Josiah Nott, an Alabama physician, used

22. This section is drawn from Morone, *Hellfire Nation,* chap. 6. James Henry Hammond, "Hammond's Letters on Slavery," in the *The Pro-Slavery Argument; As Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Richmond, VA: Walker Richards, 1852), 109–10. This was the best-known collection of "respectable" pro-slavery literature—aimed at genteel audience. An entirely different, far more bare knuckled racialist, republican "Herrenvolk" literature also developed (although Hartz largely ignores it). W. Gilmore Simms, "The Morals of Slavery," *The Pro-slavery Argument,* 251; George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!* 135 [dangerous]; William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," *The Pro-slavery Argument,* 5–8; See, also, John Calhoun, *Works,* 6 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1860), 1:55–57.

23. Calhoun, *Works,* 2:630; J. H. Van Evrie, M.D. *Negroes and Negro "Slavery": The First an Inferior Race—The Later, its Normal Condition* (Baltimore, MD: John D Toy, 1853) 30; even in this crowd, Van Evrie stands out in his tooth-rattling racism. For an analysis of the moral steward theme, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), chap. 1.

24. William Gilmore Simms, "The Morals of Slavery," *The Pro-Slavery Argument,* 274 [emphasis in the original].

25. Simms, "*Morals of Slavery,*" 269–70; the piece originally appeared in *The Southern Literary Messenger* III (1837): 641–57. Simms was elected to Congress in 1844.

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"scientific ethnography" (skull measurements) to "deny the unity of the human species." An especially vicious line of argument followed this theme and began to flourish in the 1850s. John H. Van Evrie wrote a monograph in which he promised to "strip off the skin of the Negro" to demonstrate that "he is not a black white man, or a man merely with a black skin, but a different and inferior species of man." Van Evrie placed African people "somewhere between the 'Ouran Outan' and the Caucasian, though somewhat closer to the former." This approach did away with any thoughts of upward mobility or dreams of freedom.[26]

However, the allegedly scientific argument came at too high a price for many southerners. Asserting separate origins challenged the Scriptures. What about Genesis? How about Adam and Eve? The scientific argument threatened influential southern churchmen. Nott's reputation got tarnished in a long brawl with the clergy. And all for what? The Bible – as the white southerners read it – sanctioned slavery loud and clear. At least until the 1850s, the patches of inadvertent liberalism operated in the context of a more classically illiberal vision: God had fixed the societal ranks and marked them by race.

### White People's Liberalism

Louis Hartz's own effort to salvage liberalism in the antebellum South focuses, not on the apologists' analysis of black population but on the conclusions they drew for the whites. The southerners, he writes, "cannot help trying to preserve Jefferson [and Locke] insofar as the whites are concerned."[27] Sure enough, he has identified another distinctively liberal theme running through a repressive literature. However, in this case, Hartz's argument will sink his entire case.

The pro-slavery apologists began this argument with a classically conservative (and antiliberal) standard: the society in which everyone knows his or her proper place. "Each one should remain in society in the condition in which he has been born and trained," wrote Thomas Dew in 1832, "and not mount too fast without preparation." Stick a crude slave overseer in a drawing room with polished gentlemen, and the poor man will be "perfectly miserable" and "soon sigh for the fields" and his rough companions. Every society, added James Henry Hammond, "has the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant."[28]

The paternalistic southerners generally drew their white hierarchy in rough, vague strokes. Although they often announced conservative principles, American individualism kept barging into their essays. All white males got constant deference. Take that unpolished overseer squirming in the drawing room; Dew asserts he cannot rise without preparation. Thirty pages later, the man is back and this time he gets lunch:

> The man to the north will not shake hands familiarly with his servant, and converse, and laugh and dine with him . . . but go South and you will find that no white man feels such inferiority of rank as to be unworthy of association . . . . Color alone is here the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy.[29]

The quasi-liberal urge kept sneaking into paternalist pro-slavery arguments. James Henry Hammond, for example, stressed that some whites were educated whereas others were not. But they were all higher toned and more apt to rise because, he argued, they all stood above the black mass.

Hartz rightly points out that George Fitzhugh was the only major, *bona fide,* neo-feudal, pro-slavery theorist; Fitzhugh argued that slavery would be good for any uneducated, "inferior" mob – the white workers of Boston and Birmingham as much as the black laborers in Tennessee or Texas. His book caused such a southern uproar that he was forced to recant in 1861. Rather, what the pro-slavery writers came back to, again and again, was the necessity of a slave class, a "social mudsill," that permitted southern whites their distinctive society. The writers were perfectly explicit about slavery as a solution to that classical Whig conundrum: How do we combine universal suffrage and political equality with social and economic stability? As Hammond and many others argued, "the poorest" and "most ignorant half of the population" was, in the South, simply ruled out of politics by virtue of their race. That still left poor, uneducated white voters, of course; however, they would be more deeply invested "in preserving a stable and well ordered government than the same class in any other country." The pro-slavery argument is, precisely as Hartz argues, animated with a kind of white people's liberalism.[30]

In the detail of the mudsill arguments, however, the liberalism fades from view – swamped by the casual brutality with which the writers defend their institution. Tract after tract, page after page, they begin by justifying the system in glowing terms ("uplifting" both blacks and whites) only to end up cataloguing vicious attitudes and terrifying practices. The tracts casually testify to violence and degradation. The master's opportunity to rape his slaves is an alleged advantage, for example, because it permits men to satisfy their lust in a way that "does not debase the civilized" (white women) whereas "it scarcely affects the mind of the Negro and does not materially affect

26. Josiah Nott, *Biblical and Physical History of Man* (Mobile, AL: Bartlett and Welford, 1849), 13, 41; J. H. Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro Slavery,* 2 (strip), 10 (oran outan), 30–31.

27. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 154.

28. Dew, "Thomas Dew on Slavery;" Hammond, "Letters on Slavery"; both in *Pro-Slavery Argument,* 436, 110–11.

29. Ibid., 462.

30. Hammond "Letter on Slavery," 111.

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his [her!] social status." Another author assures the reader: "It [that is, rape – the tracts delicately deploy pronouns to soften the subject] does no great injustice to [the slave] herself."[31] Reading these blueprints for a good society – built always on the backs of black men and women – is like walking through a chamber of horrors.

The trouble with Hartz's argument – that the proslavery argument is really about liberalism for white people – lies in the blunt fact that the equality is predicated on such deeply illiberal practices. One after another, the authors are perfectly explicit about the subordination and repression necessary to create their good, Lockean, white society. Surely a society that represses two million black people for the benefit of three and half million whites (in 1830) cannot be called liberal.

If Hartz could have seen the slaves as subjects (rather than objects), he would have come across a far more expansive argument – though a far less liberal one. Slavery's apologists relied heavily on religious and moral arguments to explain why slavery was good for both blacks and whites, men and women (at least till the 1850s when both pseudoscience and raw racism became more common).

Taking race seriously means listening for the black rejoinder. If the slaveholders used the churches to defend slavery, many (though by no means all) black leaders used their own churches to defy it.[32] The great black narrative drew on Exodus to construct an image of God's chosen people, the new Israelites suffering in cruel bondage and dreaming of a life across the river Jordan, out of Egypt and liberated from slavery. The black jeremiad promised freedom and prophesized a day when the Lord would avenge the tyrannical nation for what it had done to His children (or, in its most elegiac phrasing, "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be by paid by another drawn with the sword").[33]

Reading the antebellum South yields plenty of liberalism – even inadvertent patches that powerfully echo Louis Hartz's central claim. But there is no avoiding the main white theme: political and religious oppression. At the heart of this literature is a great moral construction about an inferior race and the argument that southern society (indeed, the American nation) cannot survive by treating that race with equality or dignity. Moreover, a full reading adds an alternative construction of a morally superior black race, unjustly enslaved and awaiting Divine justice.

31. Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," 40–41; Simms, "Morals of Slavery, 230.

32. Political scientists and historians—although far more sensitive today—still fall into the same trap as Hartz. Contemporary scholars now privilege race, yet taking black voices seriously would mean thinking hard about religion as both a repressing and a liberating political force.

33. On the black faith, see Morone, *Hellfire Nation,* 131–43; the quotation is from Lincoln's second inaugural (214–15), which, I argue, melds the Puritan and African American jeremiads.

Even on the unlikely ground of the South's "reactionary Enlightenment," *The Liberal Tradition* offers some traction; however, it cannot explain race or slavery either before or after the Civil War. Nor can it finally explain the way white defenders (much less black jeremiads) constructed the problem. Taking race seriously – reading antebellum black America alongside the white proslavery texts – forces us to confront the importance of religion and moral argument on every side of the issue. In the end, America has many storybook truths. Even this brief look at the pro-slavery argument suggests three: the liberal tradition (the weakest in great debate about slavery); the American racial epic; and a powerful moral urge that helps every side pick its way between an "us" (elected by God) and a "them" (who, depending on the narrative's perspective, would either be raised up or cast down).

## V. ALTERNATE STORY BOOK TRUTHS

Hartz interrogates the standard American eras from 1776 to the 1950s. A close analysis of each period yields more or less what I have suggested for antebellum America: Hartz's exaggerates what is, in fact, an often strong case for liberalism by rejecting every alternative idea, myth, and analytic tradition. A richer understanding of American political culture awaits a more detailed exploration of the many American storybook truths. In this section, I go back to Hartz's (and Tocqueville's) metaphoric first settlers and suggest how they can be reread to introduce an entirely different American theme.

Hartz imagined the earliest Americans escaping Old World oppressions and carrying with them the foundations of an enduring, liberal political culture. They look very different, however, if we focus on the religious dreams that drove them from England (and Holland). Again, Tocqueville: "It seems to me that I can see the entire destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who came ashore." Those early settlers arrived in 1630 and promptly confronted the great founding question: Who are we? In England, the crown had provided the answer by persecuting them for their faith. But, as minister Thomas Shepherd put the problem in 1636, here "there are no enemies to hunt you to heaven."[34]

Who were they? The Puritans concocted a famous answer: they were the community of saints. Leadership, in both church and state, went to men preordained for salvation by their neo-Calvinist God. The settlers calibrated their ranks with fine moral distinctions. Proven saints could vote for both political and

34. Tocqueville, *de la Democratie en Amerique,* 1:382. (*Democracy in America,* 278); Thomas Shepherd, "The Parable of the Ten Virgins" [orig. 1636], in *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology,* ed. Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 172.

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church leaders. People who had not proven their salvation were expected to follow. And the unsaved were cast off – slaughtered (like native Americans), hung (the witches), or cast off (so many heretics ended up in Rhode Island that Cotton Mather would later dub it the *latrina* of New England). It was virtue that distinguished leaders from followers, voters from nonvoters, us from them.

One last leap marked the Puritans and their legacy. They arrived with a mission – redeeming the Protestant Reformation. In the Old World, corruption had eroded Calvin's ideals. The Puritans would start fresh and set a model for the rest of the world. Even before they had landed, Governor John Winthrop delivered his beautiful lay sermon, drawn from the Sermon on the Mount: "We shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." The idea stuck and spread. Americans constantly return to the heady image of a Providential task, a great experiment unfolding in the United States, while the rest of the world – all eyes – looks and learns. The precise content of the American lesson evolves – Christian faith, political freedom, free markets – but 350 years after Winthrop's sermon, one scholar, Sacvan Bercovitch, describes his "astonishment, as a Canadian immigrant, at learning about the prophetic history of America." Here was "a population that despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed could believe in something called the American mission and could invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest."[35]

The Puritan trope lives on. The essential vision – a community of model citizens – continues to denote the American us. Finely calibrated moral distinctions still run across the ranks: the poor, for example, are divided into deserving (low income workers who play by the rules) and the undeserving (welfare mavens or drug abusers). Each political theme discussed earlier – social welfare benefits, the prison population, slavery, American racial discourse, American political culture – can be reconsidered in moral terms. An always-evolving immigrant nation that fancies itself the model for the world scrutinizes new neighbors – and a long, shifting list of uncertain others – for both their virtue and for their fit with American values.

What most distinguishes the United States from other industrial nations is not only liberal economics but a rich, often feverish, religious life. Most comparable nations slowly developed from religious to secular, the United States has gone, in contrast, from revival to revival.[36] By any measure, it is more churched (and more ardently) religious today than it was a half century ago. The United States is not just the home of Wal-Mart and McDonalds, short vacations and weak unions. It is also the land of the megachurch, the evangelical talk show, the Congressional prayer breakfast and the born-again President with an open mind about creationism. During a televised presidential primary debate in 2004, Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times* probed John Kerry for whether he fit into the American cultural mainstream: "Are you a liberal?" she asked and as time ran out followed up with, "really quick, is God on America's side?[37]

Understanding American political culture – in 1630, 1830, or 2005 – means getting beyond Hartz and exploring all the complicated features of the United States. This rich, liberal nation embraces multiple, often clashing tribes and takes its religion especially seriously. Ultimately, reading Hartz challenges us to try a more serious analysis of culture by exploring all of America's many storybook truths.

## VI. RENEWING HARTZ

Hartz shrewdly and provocatively explicated a popular view of American culture. Today his Horatio Alger regime is, if anything, even more deeply entrenched than when he published *The Liberal Tradition*. Nevertheless, time has exposed both flaws and snares in the analysis. The absence of feudal and clerical oppressions works better as popular myth than as an analytic explanation. It overlooks the many other traditions, including race, gender, and religion, that define American political culture. And, Louis Hartz's legacy imposes at least two unhappy limits on contemporary political scholarship.

First, Hartz chilled cultural analysis within American political development. His simple, one dimensional argument stands as the mildly disreputable classic of cultural work. While political scientists have grown highly sophisticated at analyzing institutions, rational choices, and elite decisions, cultural studies have been frozen in a kind of Hartzian amber. Other disciplines – history, American civilization, anthropology, literary studies, women's studies – all take popular culture far more seriously than mainstream political science.

Moreover, Hartz bequeathed to historical politics an overly simple image of liberalism. American political development continues to read the concept in the same, simple fashion: equality, rights, limited government, and economic markets. In contrast, political theorists have transformed liberalism into one of the most dynamic and contested ideas about politics. A quite extraordinary range of thinkers – from left to right, from highly individualistic to quite communitarian – wrestle over its meaning.[38]

35. Sacvan Berkovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 11.

36. Pippa Norris, Ronald Iglehart, and David Leege, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chap. 1.

37. Reported in *The American Prospect*, July 2004, 33.

38. For an illustration of the range, see Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); John Tomasi, *Liberalism beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

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Like any iconic work, *The Liberal Tradition* ought to be viewed as a challenge, a heuristic, a set of questions. Taking Hartz seriously would mean fewer critiques of his book and more analyses of his subject – the flamboyant, sometimes heroic, often repressive, deeply liberal, popular American culture. We ought to cheer *The Liberal Tradition* for the classic it is, shake off the limitations Hartz bequeathed us, and reconnect history with political theory and mainstream political science with popular culture.

University press, 2001); Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Amy Guttman, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Robert Horwitz, *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986).

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