Studies in American Political Development, 19 (Fall 2005), 234–239.

Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America* as Method

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On the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America,* the book remains more controversial than ever. As Philip Abbott has recently catalogued, the book has been attacked from literally every direction possible.[1] Sean Wilentz summarizes the feelings of many when he argues that Hartz should be forgotten, or at best considered "a figure of historical interest."[2] Hartz has been accused of being loose with the facts, inappropriate in comparing America to continental Europe, and blind to other perspectives such as race or morality. Even those who take him seriously argue his theory is anything but a complete explanation of American political development and thought, but rather one that at best represents a mere slice of America's "multiple traditions." Finally, of course, there is a very large and influential school of American political development that argues ideas have very little role at all in explaining politics, and for adherents to this way of thinking, Hartz is simply irrelevant.[3] For many members of the American political development scholarly community, there is simply no room left for taking Hartz's thesis seriously any more, if there ever was.

Despite the onslaught, *The Liberal Tradition in America* remains an extremely important book to American political development, and deserves to rank among the canon of political science. Graduate students should continue struggle with it, researchers should take his theories seriously, and as importantly, teachers should understand the book not simply for the argument it makes, but also for the opportunities it opens for teaching our students the skills and perspectives they need to generate and test their own theories.

Politics is about the creation of the perception that there is a problem, proposing solutions to that problem, and then trying to reach an agreement on it. For a proposal to be taken seriously as a solution, it must be seen by either or both political elites and the mass public as being both *feasible* and *desirable.* A feasible solution is one that is understood, on the table, and not beyond thought of implementation. A solution is desirable when one wants to see it implemented. Hartz wrote about this in the context of socialism, but the liberalism he discussed speaks to many other examples as well. By the 1910s, for example, workers provided an enormous demand for both health and sickness insurance; yet virtually every form available was substandard, either due to its expense, waiting period, or limited coverage. What Americans needed was either universal coverage from the government, or group health coverage from their employers. The problem was that few insurers even offered group health at this time – they simply had not yet conceived of it.[4] Group health insurance at the start of the century was an example of a form of mutual assistance being desirable, but not yet deemed feasible. Universal health care provided by the government (most proposals focused on the state level), had been proposed in elite circles by the American Association of Labor Legislation, among others, and precedents by that point existed in several European nations. Yet as Daniel T. Rodgers has noted, any association of so-

1. Philip Abbott, "Still Louis Hartz after All These Years: A Defense of the Liberal Society Thesis," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 93–109. See also, James T. Kloppenberg, "In Retrospect: Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America,*" *Reviews in American History* 29 (2001): 460–78.

2. Sean Wilentz, "Uses of *The Liberal Tradition:* Comments on "Still Louis Hartz after All These Years"," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 117.

3. Of the two major "schools" of American political development, historical institutionalism leaves little room at all for the study of culture. For a discussion, see Brian J. Glenn, "The Two Schools of American Political Development," *Political Studies Review* 2 (2004): 153–65.

4. In a delicious understatement, the authors of a 1917 survey of health insurance coverage in Illinois said the following of the nascent group health industry, "[G]roup health and accident insurance, if its development continues, may constitute an important partial solution of the insurance problem of the wage-earner" (Illinois Health Insurance Commission, *Report of the Health Insurance Commission of the State of Illinois* [Springfield: Illinois State Journal Co., 1919], 497).

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ISSN 0898–588X/05 $12.00

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cial insurance with Europe became an extreme liability, especially after WWI.[5] In this case, the proposed solution could certainly be depicted as feasible, just not desirable.

In the history of the politics of mutual assistance in America, we constantly witness surprising disparities between what forms of private and social insurance are offered, what is needed, and what is purchased or obtained. The fact that there is a need for a particular form of mutual assistance in the polity neither means that industry or the government will provide it, nor that citizens will seek coverage when they have a chance to. In the nineteenth century, much of this was due to the institutional nature of employment, which was usually seasonal and rarely long-term, rendering employment-based insurance unfeasible and income too sporadic for long-term planning. In the twentieth century, as Jacob S. Hacker as brilliantly explained, institutional configurations made certain patterns of coverage easier to offer than others.[6]

Disparities also existed for ideational reasons, preventing certain options from being considered desirable because they conflicted with narratives of risk and responsibility. These narratives were frequently informed by Christian thinking.[7] In 1721, the citizens of Boston debated the appropriateness of inoculating themselves against the smallpox epidemic that would claim the lives of one in eleven in the town that year. As the Bible told them, Job was protected by his faith alone when the Devil filled his veins with poison and caused pustules to appear on his skin. A generation later, Christians on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in serious debate over the use of lightning rods to protect their buildings, since if God wanted to burn one down, who were mere mortals to prevent it?[8] The following generation raised the same questions about whether or not life insurance mitigated the Will of God, debating the meaning of the biblical passage, "Take no thought for the morrow."[9] In the 1950s, the Old Order Amish convinced Congress to grant them an exemption from joining the Social Security system, due to religious dictates that they should separate themselves from the outside world[10] and take care of one another in times of need.[11] For the past several decades, the American polity and its lawmakers have grappled with questions of birth control, abortion, and most recently, voluntary termination of life. Americans are a nation with the soul of a church and always have been, as James Morone has recently catalogued.[12]

In the same way that religion has shaped the nature of debates over the ways Americans protected themselves, the liberalism described by Hartz has routinely informed debates over the ways they protected "others" through the welfare state. William Graham Sumner summarized nicely the thinking of many in America about how tax dollars should be used to protect the nation's poor in his book *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other.* His answer, for those who have not read the book, is "nothing," since America was a place where anyone could rise and anyone could fall, depending on how hard they chose to work.[13] The concept of "deserving" versus "undeserving" poor is nowhere as strong as it is in America, where throughout the nation's history, the "able-bodied" poor have always been vilified (and feared) for their poverty.[14] Being a nation of liberals, Americans have great difficulty envisioning poverty systematically for the very reasons Hartz catalogues. Consequently, they have just as great a difficulty finding systemic solutions either feasible or desirable.

At first glance, it is tempting to discuss feasibility in institutional terms and desirability in ideational ones; however, such an approach would be dangerously incorrect. Both concepts are relevant for each perspective. Feasibility and desirability can be framed, when appropriate, in terms of institutional constraints and policy precedents. At other times, they are best thought of as sitting in the realm of ideas, and, as such, are subject to their means of representation by policy entrepreneurs. Finally, of course, they can be seen as both at the same time. In the introduction to her book, *Social Policy in the United States,* Theda Skocpol notes:

> Analyses in this collection show that arguments over particular social policies at given moments of U.S. history have been closely linked to perspectives on what the U.S. government should do, and to beliefs about what it apparently *can* do effectively. Policy debates are also influenced by the reactions of governmental

5. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 257.

6. Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

7. Brian J. Glenn, "God and the Red Umbrella: Risk, Responsibility, and the Politics of Mutual Assistance in America," *Connecticut Insurance Law Journal* 10 (2004): 277–307.

8. When one locality in France passed a law banning lightning rods, a young attorney arguing his very first case brought national acclaim to himself in arguing for a defendant by questioning how mere mortals could ever mitigate the Will of God. His performance in this case brought Maximilien Robespierre to the attention of political leaders, and the rest, as they say, is history.

9. Matt. 6:34.

10. "Touch not the unclean thing," (IICor. 6:17); "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help" (Isa. 31:1).

11. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:2); "But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1Tim. 5:8).

12. James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

13. William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other* (1883; Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1995).

14. Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse,* Tenth Anniversary Ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996). Most recently, see Jason DeParle, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare* (New York: Viking, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> officials, citizens, and politically active social groups to previous public policies. Prior policies may be seen as models to be extended or imitated; or they may be seen as "bad" examples to be avoided in the future.[15]

Political development is rarely merely about institutions or ideas; it is usually influenced by a combination of both, and because of this, American political development scholars must focus both on generating robust theories of political development that take ideas and institutions seriously, and think broadly about ways of testing those theories empirically. As researchers, one can look to Hartz for an example of this. *The Liberal Tradition in America* offers lessons about why Americans have failed to consider certain options as either feasible or desirable when those same ideas were widely accepted in other places. As teachers, we can use the book to open our students to a variety of questions about the skills and perspectives they need to produce quality scholarship.

THE LIBERAL TRADITION AND AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

The Liberal Tradition in America truly is a "classic" in the field of American political development. Hartz's controversial thesis launched several important lines of inquiry for scholars, including those of J. David Greenstone, who himself set a generation of political historians asking about the nature of liberalism in America.[16] A point easily missed is the fact that Hartz did not launch so much important inquiry because his thesis was *accepted,* but rather because it was *controversial.* Scholars such as Greenstone, who took Hartz's thesis seriously, used the book as a stepping-stone, exploring its nuances in an effort to understand how liberalism has worked in practice to influence political development.[17] Detractors have made a cottage industry of pointing to its real or alleged errors, omissions, and simplifications.

As a result, this book continues to provide a great deal of intellectual fodder, and the reason for this is clear: Louis Hartz produced a viable unified theory of American political development through his focus on the central role of liberalism. Hartz's thesis is, indeed, all-encompassing. The "irrational liberalism" that he saw gripping Americans throughout their history explained the omnipresence of what Tom Wicker calls the American "liberal – the "American democrat," who believes in individual liberty, equality, and capitalism and who regards the human marketplace, where a person succeeds or fails by his own efforts and ability, as the proper testing ground for achievement."[18]

There are certainly many examples where this holds true while we might expect otherwise. As critics point out, however, there are also many areas where Hartz does not hold up particularly well. The beauty of unified theories is that, as odd as this seems at first glance, they do not have to hold up under all circumstances. Human activity is simply too complex to hold any theory to a universal standard. In fact, a theory that works for most people most of the time is still an impressive discovery. Yet we do not need to hold Hartz to even *that* standard. What Hartz has offered researchers is an archetype against which we can judge the real world. If the theory's expectations stand, we can proceed to ask if the outcomes obtain for the reason Hartz suggests. If it fails to explain most outcomes most of the time, then we begin to question its utility. Despite the numerous attempts to dislodge the book, *The Liberal Tradition in America* has endured for so long because the theory it presents is powerful and holds up surprisingly well, all things considered. Liberalism may not be the only driving ideology in American political development, but it certainly is the central one, and while there have been many attempts to refine Hartz, none so far has succeeded in replacing him. For those who study the place of ideas in American political development, no book has been more influential in directing inquiry that Hartz has.

For a book to be a classic that should be considered part of the canon, its value cannot simply be in what it has done in the past. It must be capable of generating new questions and insights into the future. Rather than discussing this solely in terms of research, I think we should also think of it in the context of teaching. The future, after all, lies not just in our own hands but also in those of our students. Our teaching and our research are intimately linked in shaping the nature of political science, and if we want to get our students thinking about the interaction of ideas and institutions, there is no one better than Hartz for doing so.

THE LIBERAL TRADITION AND TEACHING AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Rogan Kersh's recent study of American political development syllabi reveals that in roughly one-third of

15. Theda Skocpol, *Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7 [emphasis in original].

16. Indeed, it probably is no coincidence that the very first article in the very first issue of *Studies in American Political Development* was written by Greenstone about Hartz. See, J. David Greenstone, "Political Culture and American Political Development: Liberty, Union, and the Liberal Bipolarity," *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986): 1–49.

17. Such as, for example, J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Morone, *Hellfire Nation;* Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

18. Tom Wicker, "Introduction," in Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America,* Tom Wicker ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1991), x.

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all courses, *The Liberal Tradition* is assigned reading.[19] Judging by these syllabi, the book is most likely assigned to study Hartz's arguments, of course; however, if we can simultaneously engage the text as a method of inquiry, looking not only at its *flaws* (as most courses seem to do), but also for its *strengths,* then, as teachers, we have a wonderful opportunity to present students with the skills and perspectives they need to study ideas in both a serious and robust manner. By this, I mean the ability to collect and process information in a way that not only provides reliable and valid conclusions, but also answers the questions the investigator wants answered – at times, requiring the ability to think unconventionally in order to find the right tools to employ at the right time. Although most American political development courses have classes specifically dedicated to methodology, as they should; this does not preclude us from teaching skills and perspectives across the rest of the course as well – and Hartz's controversial book provides ample opportunity for just such an approach.

SKILLS AND PERSPECTIVES

Few of us in political science departments, it seems, teach our students how to write a letter to an archivist or what to look for when searching through primary sources. Sadly, we seldom take our teaching outside the classroom. I suspect a large percentage of students doing research in old periodicals do not think to look at the advertisements for what they can tell us about the narratives of the era, or even reflect on how political opinions are expressed today when thinking about where we might find sources of them in the past.[20] While many American political development courses appear to dedicate a fair amount of time to getting students to think about various methodological questions, few (judging from their syllabi, at least) appear to dedicate time to the mechanics of conducting research, especially in the field. Although we assign Hartz for other reasons, his book proves remarkably useful at filling these lacunae, as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

RESEARCH METHODS

One great value of Hartz's work is that he addresses culture and ideology from multiple approaches. At times, he refers to philosophers; at others, to the experiences of political elites, and, still later, he makes reference to mass experiences. As a result, his book opens a broad avenue to discussions about how to study ideas in an era before polling. By my understanding, a "classic" is a work that opens its readers to new ideas and subjects for research; if *The Liberal Tradition in America* is to survive as a classic in the future, the work it will inspire will focus less on testing Hartz's hypothesis, I suspect, and more on understanding why America remained under the grip of the "fixed, dogmatic" and "irrational" liberalism Hartz detailed.[21]

The greatest challenges facing students of historical culture is how to find it, how to make sense of it, and how to measure its effects. The danger of misattributing causation and correlation is tremendous, and, as a topic, this remains shockingly under-theorized in ideational scholarship. If Hartz is correct in his thesis, or, for that matter, even *partially* correct, he opens the door to far deeper levels of empirical analysis as to why he was correct. How did liberalism get handed down from generation to generation so effectively?

One recent and stunningly innovative approach to this question is David Hackett Fischer's *Liberty and Freedom.*[22] Rather than look to theorists for explanations of the enduring centrality of the duel concepts of liberty and freedom in America, Hackett Fischer looks instead to Americans' day-to-day lived experiences and to the icons people employed both to express their ideas and to promote them. He draws on the ideas of Tocqueville, who understood Americans to hold the concepts of liberty and freedom not in philosophical terms, but rather as *habitudes du couer* (habits of the heart).[23] Although Hackett Fischer was not focusing on Hartz, his approach drives directly at Hartz's thesis: If liberalism was carried over from generation to generation, we should expect it to be reflected in writing, icons, and symbols from all corners of the polity.

The future of American political development lies not just in asking new questions, but also in approaching old ones in new ways. Due in part to how political scientists learn their field, and also, I suspect, in part to concerns about tenure, political scientists have been slow to learn from other disciplines, particularly anthropology. Fortunately, Hartz provides an entry to just such an approach. Finding clues of attitudes about liberalism, race, morality, and ascriptive hierarchy in the past can be a challenge, and quite frankly, a source of great fun and satisfaction. We get to dig through old letters, read old periodicals, plays and campaign literature. We get to immerse ourselves in the lives of others, and, when we do, the world of the past can come alive, often in exciting (and surprising) ways. Take furniture, for example. As Hackett Fischer points out, in the mid-eighteenth century,

19. Rogan Kersh, "The State of American Political Development: A View from the Classroom," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 340.

20. I recommend they read, Deborah Stone, "Ad Missions: How Insurance Companies Sell Ideology," *The American Prospect* 16 (1994): 19–25.

21. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 9, 211.

22. David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 480.

23. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Dmeocracy in America,* ed. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 264, cited in Hackett-Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom,* 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

skilled cabinetmakers added embellishments such as finial busts to the large pieces they created. Of the surviving finial busts on large pieces of furniture from Philadelphia between 1762 and 1775, one individual stands out among all others – John Locke. "Historians have challenged the primacy of Locke's books in the philosophy of the American Revolution," Hackett Fischer notes, "but Philadelphia's furniture makers had no doubt of his central role." Likewise, not only his bust but his written works were central to the time. No author dominated libraries and book lists throughout the colonies more than Locke.[24] If a goal is to teach students how to be political historians, they need to know how to study the relevant data. This includes how to study not just institutions but also ideas, which is done by examining arguments that were made and how they resonated with the lived experiences of the target audience. If syllabi are any indicator, not one American political development instructor ever actually steps foot out of the classroom with his or her students. Yet, by heading to the local museum, historic site, or local archive, we can open our students to a wide array of data about the past, opening the ways for discussions about how to approach it.

COMPARISONS

To support his theory that the unique hold that liberalism has on American society is due to the absence of feudalism in its past, along with the presence from even before the founding of liberalism itself, Hartz uses comparison to test and support his theory. He states at the start of his work that, "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."[25] Hartz compares various aspects of the American experiences to selected counterparts in Europe at key junctures in American history, such as the Founding, the antebellum period, the Progressive era, and the New Deal, along with a discussion of America and world afterwards to the point of his writing.

One way to treat the book as a methods tool is to have one's students consider what exactly Hartz was comparing. In parts of *The Liberal Tradition in America,* Hartz focuses on the experience of an "average citizen," then begs myriad questions regarding the nature of what the experience of an "average citizen" actually was. Should students prove eager to criticize the use of references to an alleged common experience, they can be met with the Tocqueville quote Hartz cites to great effect: "The great advantage of the Americans is, that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution; and that they are born equal, instead of becoming so."[26] Are the students as ready to critique Tocqueville on terms of a common experience as they are Hartz? If not, why? This could lead to an extremely fruitful and interesting discussion about studies of mass cultural experiences, including who exactly falls into the "in" category at any given time period and who is left out.

Continuing along the question of what is being compared, Hartz focuses at various points on the common experience of Americans in general, the experience of a particular socioeconomic class, and at yet others he compares theorists. This allows students to address important issues surrounding relations between theory and experience. Does one need to experience class relations truly to understand Marx, for example? Arguably, Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* as an instruction manual for his fellow Europeans, seeing America's form of government as the future of his own continent's as well. Was this naïve?[27] What, in short, is the relationship between belief and experience? These are vital questions for students of intellectual history.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

"You do not get closer to the significance of an earthquake by ignoring the terrain on which it takes place," Hartz argues.[28] Throughout the book, Hartz calls upon students to remember the concept we now refer to as "intersubjectivity," which is seeing the world through the eyes of the individuals whom we study. Mass publications have always contained narratives about gender, religion, race, and liberalism in their articles, editorials (which were often the same thing), and advertisements. The challenge for the historian is not only to make sense of them from our own perspectives, but from that of reader at the time as well. As teachers, we, of course, must occasionally remind ourselves that we need formally to teach our students to do this. Just as vital, students need to be taught that they themselves are embedded in time. Each holds assumptions about the world that taint the lens employed to view it. Some are trained and inclined to look for questions of gender, for example, while others look for class. To this end, all can view Louis Hartz as an author who is both striving to understand how others experienced the American socioeconomic world, and also who as a scholar was himself embedded in time – a position, in fact, we all

24. Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom,* 94–96.

25. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 4.

26. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969), II:2.3.

27. Hartz asks, "Can a people that is born free ever understand peoples elsewhere that have become so? Can it ever lead them?" (66). We can flip this question around and ask the obverse of the Europeans Tocqueville was addressing as well.

28. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition,* 20.

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share.[29] This is something that should be discussed with every generation of new political historians. With luck, this could lead to fruitful introspection regarding understandings of causation and where students see themselves not just in the literature, but also in the methodological debates that inform it.

Finally, we can return to Hartz as generating a unified theory. Hartz sees liberalism everywhere, and wants to understand why. Few works of political history make such broad claims as his work does. *The Liberal Tradition in America* serves as the perfect work for generating a discussion of the standards to which we political historians need to hold ourselves. When should a theory be dismissed? Should we strive to generate unified theories, or is the attempt utopian? How, if at all, are they useful?

CONCLUSION

If the members of the American political development subfield are to understand ourselves as a subfield, it will be because we see our methods and our lines of inquiry as engaged in an on-going dialogue. This dialogue is constantly evolving, raising new questions, and seeing new connections, even as we continue to refine old ones. From this perspective, works have value not simply due to how well authors defend their theses, but, more importantly, to the extent they generate new questions or methodological insights. *The Liberal Tradition in America* continues to inspire thinking about the nature of American liberalism and its relationship to political development.

The book can inspire more than just new inquiry; it can also serve as a useful teaching tool, raising questions about methodology that reach far beyond the mere subject of the book. There have been precious few American political development scholars writing about *how* we teach. To this end, it is fruitful to see *The Liberal Tradition in America* as more than a book making a substantive claim – to see it also as a door that opens to teaching skills and perspectives necessary for looking into the past. In the course of discussing the content of the work, we can, with a little effort, draw in other useful lessons as well. What implications for studying history do we take if Hartz is correct, or even partially correct? Hartz's methodology was hardly robust. How could we design a proper inquiry to test his theory robustly? Where should we look to see if he is correct? How would we go about looking for the mechanisms that propagated the liberalism he saw surging through every corner of American political debates? How much empirical validity must a unified theory have to be considered successful? Finally, how can students use this book to find their own place in methodological debates? By studying *the Liberal Tradition in America* along these lines, students will not only come out of the course better trained to ask their own questions, but they might just come with a deeper understanding of Hartz as well.

29. A point made nicely in Abbott, "Still Louis Hartz after All These Years."

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