



AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL:

An Essay on Daniel Boorstin and Louis Hartz

By James O'Brien

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There was a time when historians had what they thought was a pretty clear picture of the divisions that had existed in American politics. This view, articulated most fully in the works of Charles A. Beard, depicted two basic lines of political descent, one from the Hamiltonian Federalists and the other from the Jeffersonian Republicans. The first line included the Federalists, the Whigs, and (after an early period of reformist zeal) the modern Republican party. It was based principally on commerce, manufacturing, and finance -- catering, in other words, to "the business interests." The second line went from Jefferson to Jackson to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Originally an alliance between southern slaveowners and small farmers, with support from the few urban workers who existed at that time, this line of descent evolved into the coalition of workers and farmers that provided decisive support for the New Deal. Throughout our history, there had thus been political conflict, based on social and economic differences and reflected in the policies of the major political factions. According to this view, Jefferson, when he said in his first inaugural address that "We are all republicans -- we are all federalists," was wrong.

Today the proponents of this theory of American political history are scattered and on the defensive.

Daniel J. Boorstin, The Genius of American Politics, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953;
Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955.

The trend in historical writing during the last two decades has been to stress the broad areas of underlying agreement between contending political groups rather than their differences on specific issues. Historians have been impressed with the fact that different groups of businessmen have been found on opposing sides of "reform" proposals, that protest movements have generally stopped short of attacking major institutions of society, and that pragmatic compromise has seemingly been the characteristic American way of resolving political disputes. Just as recent presidents have sought a "consensus" on public policies, recent historians have claimed that such a consensus has been a hallmark of the American past.

It is easy enough to trace the roots of this quest for a conflict-free heritage. Since World War II most Americans have seen their country as engaged in a desperate battle -- for security and ultimately for survival -- against a conspiratorial world communist movement. During this Cold War, the American economy has become dependent on military spending and American foreign policy has focused on the goal of fighting left-wing revolutionary movements in foreign countries. Anti-communism has been a generally shared premise of American policy (domestic as well as foreign) and the difference between "us" and "them" has made all our internal differences seem comparatively trivial. This has had two profound effects on historical writing. First, stability has been depicted as the normal state of American society, which means that genuinely radical doctrines have been alien importations rather than a product of American conditions. Second, the enemy's methodology, Marxism, particularly its stress on the class struggle, has been regarded with distaste and suspicion. There have never been many Marxist historians in the U.S., but Beard and others of his generation were at least not hesitant to use Marx's insights in working out their own methodology. During the Cold War, however, Marxism has come to be seen as nothing more than the religion of a fanatical and deluded enemy.

Of course, to "explain" the origins of an intellectual trend is not the same thing as pronouncing it "good" or "bad". There is a great deal to be said for the kind of historical writing that has emerged in the new environment. Once we get away from the idea that there have been deep cleavages between Whigs and Jacksonians, Republicans and Democrats, we can begin a fresh examination of American development. Having identified the sham conflicts for what they were, we can go on to look for the real conflicts, open or latent. Having found agreement rather than conflict in the political system, we can go on to ask how that agreement has come about, and whom it has benefitted. Out of such an analysis could come a fresh interpretation of the American past -- one that goes beyond the sometimes naive generalizations made by Beard and provides some genuine insight into how America got where it is today.

Unfortunately, the movement away from Beard has instead turned into a kind of aimless wandering. The basic questions that are opened up by the repudiation of Beard's general formula have for the most part been ignored. The attempts to advance new generalizations to replace Beard's have been few and insubstantial. The student who accepts many of the insights of the "consensus" school, yet also wonders if it has a positive contribution to make, is left with the two books that are the subject of this review: The Genius of American Politics and The Liberal Tradition in America. For these are the twin monuments of the "consensus" school, the most outstanding and influential attempts to analyze what the American consensus has been and what impact it has had. By examining the weaknesses of Boorstin and Hartz, it is possible to gain an appreciation of the failure of American historical scholarship to provide us with a coherent and meaningful picture of our past.

II

The first thing to note about both of these books is that they concentrate in a misleading way on political ideas. To state the thesis of each simply, Hartz claims that our political life has been determined by an absence of feudal institutions and a consequent agreement on liberal ideals as expounded by John Locke; while Boorstin says that a confused sense of what he calls "givenness" has served us in place of a logically consistent political philosophy, preserving us from the evils of ideological dispute. Strictly speaking, neither of them claims that conflict has been lacking in American history: both mention the Civil War, for example. What they do assert is that there has been underlying agreement on basic political values.

The question that immediately arises is this: assuming that such a consensus has existed, how much help does it give us in explaining actual historical events? For example, how much do we learn about the causes of the Civil War from the assertion that both sides in it shared certain common political values? To assert this gives us no more aid in explaining why they fought than to say that soldiers on both sides wore trousers and shirts. Lincoln and Davis may have thought alike, just as Johnny Reb and Billy Yank may have dressed alike, but so what? It was still the bloodiest war in the entire nineteenth century -- in fact, in all of world history up to that point -- and its occurrence has to be explained. Similarly, it may be interesting to know that the American labor movement has generally eschewed the socialist doctrine of the class struggle; but if we know only that, we may be at a loss to explain why there has been more violence in our labor-management relations than in those of western Europe. Other examples of bitter conflict in American history, not reflected in our political thought as analyzed by Boorstin and Hartz, are the virtual war of extermination waged against the Indian and the countless episodes of racial violence and terrorism.

The first great weakness, then, of the Boorstin-Hartz concentration on political thought is that it

treats in isolation something that is part of a very complex and curious phenomenon. Although our political party divisions have rarely been sharp, and although Americans have not thrived on quarrels over political theory, there has been a remarkable amount of raw physical violence in the American past. And neither of these authors gives us the tools with which we can understand that violence.

It is this same insistence on viewing the past through its political thought that enables both authors to gloss over another salient feature of American history: exploitation. For political thought, in the sense understood by Boorstin and Hartz, is something that is the exclusive province of the articulate classes of society. In their terms, slaveowners may be expected to engage in political thought, but slaves would not be expected to. The same is true of bankers and factory owners on the one hand and immigrant workmen on the other; city officials on the one hand and ghetto residents on the other; frontier promoters on the one hand and Indians on the other; and so on. It is as though we were to find a man standing with his back against a closet door, feet braced, breathing hard, and were to ask him his views on the proposition "It's wrong to lock people in closets". No harm is done by asking the question and noting his answer, but we can learn a lot more if we also check the closet. And if we do find someone inside, we might ask him what he thinks. Hartz and Boorstin consistently ignore the underprivileged classes and/or make unsupported generalizations about how they have felt.

Hartz' does provide something that is missing in Boorstin's book, and that is a cautious hint that not all Americans have benefitted equally from the existence of an American consensus. Hartz constructs a political category of "Whigs" into which he places all political groups (Federalists, antebellum Whigs, and Republicans) which have tended to represent "the wealthier, conservative strand in the

liberal movement." He states that starting with the election of 1840, in which Benjamin Harrison's "Log Cabin" campaign swamped the Democrats, the "Whigs" learned to beguile the mass of voters by appealing to the ideas of "Algerism" -- stressing opportunities for self-advancement -- and "Americanism". His insight, however, is undeveloped. For one thing, Hartz has reconstructed Beard's concept of the political lines of descent, without even bothering to make Beard's distinction between agricultural and other forms of wealth. More important, Hartz uses election returns as his basic criterion for the success of the "Whigs." But if we accept the consensus school's insight that differences between our major political parties have been minor, then the outcome of specific elections has been inconsequential. The success of American capitalists has consisted in their ability to keep their workers in line and to have expanding markets for their products; "reform" presidents such as the two Roosevelts and Woodrow Wilson have differed little from their conservative brethren in their willingness to use governmental policy to further these interests of capitalists. Thus Hartz, while recognizing that the American consensus has worked to the benefit of those at the top of society, gives only a highly superficial answer to the question of how it has been used, and for what purposes.

That Boorstin's treatment is even more vulnerable on this point is shown by his use of the term "ideology." He employs it to mean sharply drawn and dogmatic systems of ideas, such as Communism, Nazism, Fascism, and so forth. That is one possible meaning of the word, but in many ways a more helpful meaning is the one stressed by Karl Mannheim in his classic Ideology and Utopia. Mannheim uses the term mainly to refer to a set of ideas built up to justify the exercise of power by those at the top of society. In feudal societies this may include a claim that these men have derived their authority from God. But in any society there has to be some rationalization built up to justify the allocation of power and wealth; only in a prison-camp type of situation, in which the guard can rely on sheer terror to make his fiat respected,

is there no need for an ideology in this sense. When we understand ideology this way we can see that America has not been free of ideology. Instead, it has had a dominant ideology that has taken a subtle, peculiar form: Our ruling classes (except for the antebellum slaveowners) have generally rationalized their power by denying it. The liberal myth that power is widely distributed in society, and that no one group is really able to get its way, has served them quite well. In some ways it is like a crooked gambling casino. The dealers do not build up an elaborate rationalization of how they came to hold the power of stacking the deck; instead, they deny that the deck is stacked, and claim that they and the customers are on an even footing.

Hartz and Boorstin have chosen to focus on American political thought, and they are within their rights in doing so. But by failing to explore the relationship between physical violence and intellectual consensus, by dealing only with the articulate classes, and especially by not asking to whose advantage the American consensus has worked, the two authors fall woefully short of making political thought relevant to the rest of American history. They have thus been able to find only consensus where there has also been much conflict, only harmony where there has also been rampant exploitation. They have told only part of the truth--the least embarrassing part--about the American past.

III

The one feature of both of these books on which the two authors seem to pride themselves most is the comparative approach: the constant injection of contrasts and analogies to European countries. They indicate that by doing this we can come to a far better understanding of American uniqueness. Hartz tends to make his comparisons much too mechanically, as when he says that the Whigs of Andrew Jackson's time were equivalent to the English Whigs who were pushing for the Reform Bill of 1832. Boorstin, for

his part, does not rely on such specific comparisons, but he does keep Europe firmly in mind. What he looks for in the American past are the fortuitous circumstances that have made us different from the Old World. European society, he tells us, is "dying" from the vices of poverty, monopoly, aristocracy, and ideology. We should be properly thankful for the accidents of history that have "immunized" us from these four diseases.

In one sense the comparative approach used by Hartz and Boorstin represents an advance over previous historical thinking. Beard, for example, although he was a keen student of European as well as American history, tended to place inadequate stress on the differences between the Old World and the New. But the question still has to be asked whether the comparative approach is potentially a very useful device for understanding our history. The answer is that it can be useful if it is used properly. Otherwise it can be highly misleading. Boorstin and Hartz, for example, are essentially engaged in the old final-exam exercise of "Compare and Contrast." They, Boorstin especially, treat societies as being essentially static. They make comparisons, but they do not go on to take the indispensable second step. That is to show the different societies developing in interaction with one another.

The distinction between these two approaches can be seen if we take as an example the relationship of the United States to West Africa. The contrasts can be listed in convenient, easy-to-read fashion, and we can prove anything we want with them, including the "superiority" of American institutions. But if we look to historical interaction rather than mechanical comparisons, we are on the road to achieving some meaningful insights. We can note that the bulk of American exports in the period before the Civil War were produced by slave labor, and that the slaves were Africans or their descendants. We can note that the profits from the slave trade, as well as profits from the crops produced by slaves

(in the West Indies and elsewhere as well as North America), gave a great boost to European and North American economic development. We can note the major impact that slavery and racism have had on American institutions and values, and we can note the distortion and exploitation of African society that came with the slave trade. We can, in other words, learn something about American and African history that will remain hidden to us if we merely make comparisons.

Similarly, it would do little good simply to compare the United States with, say, Chile or Guatemala or any other country in Latin America. It is much more important to ask about interaction and about historical relationships. In the early twentieth century the U. S. came to replace England as the strongest nation in Latin American affairs, and its economic, political, and military power has been used in ways that are significant both for us and for the Latin Americans. It can be contended that economic growth in the advanced western countries such as the U. S. has been accompanied by, and in fact built upon, stagnation in the economies of Latin America and other poor areas of the world. Just as the affluence of an Andrew Carnegie was directly related to the poverty of the men who worked in his steel mills, so (according to this view) may American affluence be directly related to the poverty of the underdeveloped lands. There is, in other words, a relationship rather than simply a contrast.

The implications of the Hartz-Boorstin reliance on sterile comparisons become clear in the foreign policy recommendations with which both conclude their books. Boorstin's theme is that Americans must realize that their history has been unique and that our political freedom has been an outgrowth of that history and of our environment. We must realize, he says, that we do not have any political philosophy that can be transplanted onto other countries; we must not expect other countries to replicate our democratic

institutions. But this has hardly been a major issue of postwar foreign policy. We did not rescue the Greek monarchy in the late 1940s because we wanted to bring political democracy to Greece, but because we wanted to preserve the economic and strategic relationship that the western capitalist countries had with Greece. The same can be said of our support for the dictatorships of Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Chiang Kai-Shek in Formosa, and the various South Vietnamese governments of the past decade. The same can be said of our overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954 and our sustained attempt to overthrow the government of Cuba. Our foreign policy has not been geared to making the world in America's image, but in preserving the privileged relationship that America enjoys with that world. Having avoided the real issues in the American past, Boorstin inevitably fails to offer anything of substance on contemporary problems. Just as he ignores poverty and racism at home, so he ignores American interventionism abroad.

The course which Hartz would have us take is not so clear. While he echoes Boorstin's insistence that we should not expect our liberal institutions to be accepted everywhere, he goes on to say that the key to success in our current problems is a better understanding of ourselves. "What is at stake is nothing less than a new level of consciousness, a transcending of irrational Lockianism, in which an understanding of self and an understanding of others go hand in hand." If we can understand that America has always enjoyed a liberal consensus and that other countries have not, we will be better equipped to combat both Russian totalitarianism abroad and McCarthyist hysteria at home. At first glance, this is an appealing, if obviously oversimplified, recommendation. In reality, however, it is addressed to a different audience than the one that Hartz has in mind. It is a message fit for Hartz' fellow liberal intellectuals, but not for the people who make the

major decisions in American society. A corporation president, for example, does not ask government aid in protection of his overseas investments because he misunderstands the American past; rather, he asks for that aid, and gets it, because his company's direct economic interests are involved. The leaders of postwar America have, for the most part, been highly rational men. Not having based their policy decisions on a set of fuzzy generalizations about American history, they are unlikely to become too excited when Hartz comes along to tell them he has a better set of fuzzy generalizations. Ultimately Hartz, because he cannot tell us why they make the decisions they do, is unequipped to recommend alternatives.

Conclusion

The Boorstin and Hartz books are important because they symbolize the failure of historians in the postwar era to provide an intelligible explanation of how America got where it is today. Rather than doing battle with the accepted myths about American society -- an admittedly difficult task, and one with little prospect of success -- they have tended only to reinforce the myths.

The type of historical interpretation that is needed is difficult to describe, but clearly we have the right to ask more of the historical profession than we have so far received. In place of the superficial treatment of a Boorstin or a Hartz, we need a concept of American history that suggests answers to some very real questions. We need to know why there has been such a great amount of violence in our past, seemingly unaccompanied by intellectual schisms. We need to know the mechanisms by which an American political consensus has been maintained in the face of this violence and in face of the obvious fact that not all have benefitted equally from the "American

way of life." We need to know the ways in which the differences between political parties have been magnified out of all proportion to the issues that have actually divided them, and the ways in which the party system has concealed genuine social conflicts. We need to know a great deal more than we do about how American history has seemed to its victims. And we need, above all, to see American history in a world context -- not a context in which all the freshly scrubbed nations line up alongside each other ready for inspection, but one in which we see some peoples expanding and prospering at the expense of others.

Note

For a list of some books and articles that may be of use to one who seeks to take this suggested approach to the American past, see "The Development of the American Political Economy: A Reading List for Radicals," by Richard Hamilton, Peter Wiley, and James O'Brien (available from Madison SDS, c/o 8 Frances Court, Madison, Wis. 53703).