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American Exceptionalism

A Double Edged Sword

By Seymour Martin Lipset

Chapter One: Ideology, Politics, and Deviance

Born out of revolution, the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society. Americanism, as different people have pointed out, is an "ism" or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are isms. As G. K. Chesterton put it: "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence. . . ." As noted in the Introduction, the nation's ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissezfaire. The revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings, as distinct from conservative Toryism, statist communitarianism, mercantilism, and noblesse oblige dominant in monarchical, state-church-formed cultures.

Other countries' senses of themselves are derived from a common history. Winston Churchill once gave vivid evidence to the difference between a national identity rooted in history and one defined by ideology in objecting to a proposal in 1940 to outlaw the anti-war Communist Party. In a speech in the House of Commons, Churchill said that as far as he knew, the Communist Party was composed of Englishmen and he did not fear an Englishman. In Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American.

The American Revolution sharply weakened the noblesse oblige, hierarchically rooted, organic community values which had been linked to Tory sentiments, and enormously strengthened the individualistic, egalitarian, and anti-statist ones which had been present in the settler and religious background of the colonies. These values were evident in the twentieth-century fact that, as H. G. Wells pointed out close to ninety years ago, the United States not only has lacked a viable socialist party, but also has never developed a British or European-type Conservative or Tory party. Rather, America has been dominated by pure bourgeois, middle-class individualistic values. As Wells put it: "Essentially America is a middle-class [which has] become a community and so its essential problems are the problems of a modern individualistic society, stark and clear." He enunciated a theory of America as a liberal society, in the classic anti-statist meaning of the term:

It is not difficult to show for example, that the two great political parties in America represent only one English party, the middle-class Liberal party. . . . There are no Tories . . . and no Labor Party. . . . [T]he new world [was left] to the Whigs and Nonconformists and to those less constructive, less logical, more popular and liberating thinkers who became Radicals in England, and Jeffersonians and then Democrats in America.

All Americans are, from the English point of view, Liberals of one sort or another. . . . The liberalism of the eighteenth century was essentially the rebellion . . . against the monarchical and aristocratic state--against hereditary privilege, against restrictions on bargains. Its spirit was essentially anarchistic--the antithesis of Socialism. It was anti-State.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

In dealing with national characteristics it is important to recognize that comparative evaluations are never absolutes, that they always are made in terms of more or less. The statement that the United States is an egalitarian society obviously does not imply that all Americans are equal in any way that can be defined. This proposition usually means (regardless of which aspect is under consideration--social relations, status, mobility, etc.) that the United States is more egalitarian than Europe.

Comparative judgments affect all generalizations about societies. This is such an obvious, commonsensical truism that it seems almost foolish to enunciate it. I only do so because statements about America or other countries are frequently challenged on the ground that they are not absolutely true. Generalizations may invert when the unit of comparison changes. For example, Canada looks different when compared to the United States than when contrasted with Britain. Figuratively, on a scale of 0 to 100, with the United States close to 0 on a given trait and Britain at 100, Canada would fall around 30. Thus, when Canada is evaluated by reference to the United States, it appears as more elitist, law-abiding, and statist, but when considering the variations between Canada and Britain, Canada looks more anti-statist, violent, and egalitarian.

The notion of "American exceptionalism" became widely applied in the context of efforts to account for the weakness of working-class radicalism in the United States. The major question subsumed in the concept became why the United States is the only industrialized country which does not have a significant socialist movement or Labor party. That riddle has bedeviled socialist theorists since the late nineteenth century. Friedrich Engels tried to answer it in the last decade of his life. The German socialist and sociologist Werner Sombart dealt with it in a major book published in his native language in 1906, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* As we have seen, H. G. Wells, then a Fabian, also addressed the issue that year in *The Future in America*. Both Lenin and Trotsky were deeply concerned because the logic of Marxism, the proposition expressed by Marx in *Das Kapital* that "the more developed country shows the less developed the image of their future," implied to Marxists prior to the Russian Revolution that the United States would be the first socialist country."

Since some object to an attempt to explain a negative, a vacancy, the query may of course be reversed to ask why has America been the most classically liberal polity in the world from its founding to the present? Although the United States remains the wealthiest large industrialized nation, it devotes less of its income to welfare and the state is less involved in the economy than is true for other developed countries. It not only does not have a viable, class-conscious, radical political movement, but its trade unions, which have long been weaker than those of almost all other industrialized countries, have been steadily declining since the mid-1950s. These issues are covered more extensively in chapter Three. An emphasis on American uniqueness raises the obvious question of the nature of the differences. There is a large literature dating back to at least the eighteenth century which attempts to specify the special character of the United States politically and socially. One of the most interesting, often overlooked, is Edmund Burke's speech to the House of Commons proposing reconciliation with the colonies, in which he sought to explain to his fellow members what the revolutionary Americans were like. He noted that they were different culturally, that they were not simply transplanted Englishmen. He particularly stressed the unique character of American religion. J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, in his book *Letters from an American Farmer*, written in the late eighteenth

century, explicitly raised the question, "What is an American?" He emphasized that Americans behaved differently in their social relations, were much more egalitarian than other nationalities, that their "dictionary" was "short in words of dignity, and names of honor," that is, in terms through which the lower strata expressed their subservience to the higher. Tocqueville, who observed egalitarianism in a similar fashion, also stressed individualism, as distinct from the emphasis on "group ties" which marked Europe.

These commentaries have been followed by a myriad--thousands upon thousands--of books and articles by foreign travelers. The overwhelming majority are by educated Europeans. Such writings are fruitful because they are comparative; those who wrote them emphasized cross-national variations in behavior and institutions. Tocqueville's *Democracy*, of course, is the best known. As we have seen, he noted that he never wrote anything about the United States without thinking of France. As he put it, in speaking of his need to contrast the same institutions and behavior in both countries, "without comparisons to make, the mind doesn't know how to proceed." Harriet Martineau, an English contemporary, also wrote a first-rate comparative book on America. Friedrich Engels and Max Weber were among the contributors to the literature. There is a fairly systematic and similar logic in many of these discussions. Beyond the analysis of variations between the United States and Europe, various other comparisons have been fruitful. In previous writings, I have suggested that one of the best ways to specify and distinguish American traits is by contrast with Canada. There is a considerable comparative North American literature, written almost entirely by Canadians. They have a great advantage over Americans since, while very few of the latter study their northern neighbor, it is impossible to be a literate Canadian without knowing almost as much, if not more, as most Americans about the United States. Almost every Canadian work on a given subject (the city, religion, the family, trade unions, etc.) contains a great deal about the United States. Many Canadians seek to explain their own country by dealing with differences or similarities south of the border. Specifying and analyzing variations among the predominantly English-speaking countries--Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States--is also useful precisely because the differences among them generally are smaller than between each and non-Anglophonic societies. I have tried to analyze these variations in *The First New Nation*. The logic of studying societies which have major aspects in common was also followed by Louis Hartz in treating the overseas settler societies--United States, Canada, Latin America, Australia, and South Africa--as units for comparison. Fruitful comparisons have been made between Latin America and Anglophonic North America, which shed light on each.

Some Latin Americans have argued that there are major common elements in the Americas which show up in comparisons with Europe. Fernando Cardoso, a distinguished sociologist and now president of Brazil, once told me that he and his friends (who were activists in the underground left in the early 1960s) consciously decided not to found a socialist party as the military dictatorship was breaking down. They formed a populist party because, as they read the evidence, class-conscious socialism does not appeal in the Americas. With the exceptions of Chile and Canada (to a limited extent), major New World left parties from Argentina to the United States have been populist. Cardoso suggested that consciousness of social class is less salient throughout most of the Americas than in postfeudal Europe. However, I do not want to take on the issue of how exceptional the Americas are; dealing with the United States is more than enough.

LIBERALISM, CONSERVATISM, AND AMERICANISM

The United States is viewed by many as the great conservative society, but it may also be seen as the most classically liberal polity in the developed world. To understand the exceptional nature of American politics, it is necessary to recognize, with H. G. Wells, that conservatism, as defined outside of the United States, is particularly weak in this country. Conservatism in Europe and Canada, derived from the historic alliance of church and government, is associated with the emergence of the welfare state. The two names most identified

with it are Bismarck and Disraeli. Both were leaders of the conservatives (Tories) in their countries. They represented the rural and aristocratic elements, sectors which disdained capitalism, disliked the bourgeoisie, and rejected materialistic values. Their politics reflected the values of noblesse oblige, the obligation of the leaders of society and the economy to protect the less fortunate.

The semantic confusion about liberalism in America arises because both early and latter-day Americans never adopted the term to describe the unique American polity. The reason is simple. The American system of government existed long before the word "liberal" emerged in Napoleonic Spain and was subsequently accepted as referring to a particular party in mid-nineteenth-century England, as distinct from the Tory or Conservative Party. What Europeans have called "liberalism," Americans refer to as "conservatism": a deeply anti-statist doctrine emphasizing the virtues of laissez-faire. Ronald Reagan and Milton Friedman, the two current names most frequently linked with this ideology, define conservatism in America. And as Friedrich Hayek, its most important European exponent noted, it includes the rejection of aristocracy, social class hierarchy, and an established state church. As recently as the April and June 1987 issues of the British magazine *Encounter*, two leading trans-Atlantic conservative intellectuals, Max Beloff (Lord Beloff) and Irving Kristol, debated the use of titles. Kristol argued that Britain "is soured by a set of very thin, but tenacious, aristocratic pretensions . . . [which] foreclose opportunities and repress a spirit of equality that has yet to find its full expression. . . ." This situation fuels many of the frustrations that make "British life . . . so cheerless, so abounding in resentment." Like Tocqueville, he holds up "social equality" as making "other inequalities tolerable in modern democracy." Beloff, a Tory, contended that what threatens conservatism in Britain "is not its remaining links with the aristocratic tradition, but its alleged indifference to some of the abuses of capitalism. It is not the Dukes who lose us votes, but the 'malefactors of great wealth. . ..'" He wondered "why Mr. Kristol believes himself to be a 'conservative,' " since he is "as incapable as most Americans of being a conservative in any profound sense." Lord Beloff concluded that "Conservatism must have a 'Tory' element or it is only the old 'Manchester School,' " i.e., liberal.

Canada's most distinguished conservative intellectual, George Grant, emphasized in his *Lament for a Nation* that "Americans who call themselves 'Conservatives' have the right to that title only in a particular sense. In fact, they are old-fashioned liberals. . . . Their concentration on freedom from governmental interference has more to do with nineteenth century liberalism than with traditional conservatism, which asserts the right of the community to restrain freedom in the name of the common good." Grant bemoaned the fact that American conservatism, with its stress on the virtues of competition and links to business ideology, focuses on the rights of individuals and ignores communal rights and obligations. He noted that there has been no place in the American political philosophy "for the organic conservatism that predates the age of progress. Indeed, the United States is the only society on earth that has no traditions from before the age of progress." The recent efforts, led by Amitai Etzioni, to create a "communitarian" movement are an attempt to transport Toryism to America. British and German Tories have recognized the link and have shown considerable interest in Etzioni's ideas. Still, it must be recognized that American politics have changed. The 1930s produced a qualitative difference. As Richard Hofstadter wrote, this period brought a "social democratic tinge" to the United States for the first time in its history. The Great Depression produced a strong emphasis on planning, on the welfare state, on the role of the government as a major regulatory actor. An earlier upswing in statist sentiment occurred immediately prior to World War 1, as evidenced by the significant support for the largely Republican Progressive movement led by Robert LaFollette and Theodore Roosevelt and the increasing strength (up to a high of 6% of the national vote in 1912) for the Socialist Party. They failed to change the political system. Grant McConnell explains the failure of the Progressive movement as stemming from "the pervasive and latent ambiguity in the movement" about confronting American anti-statist values. "Power as it exists was antagonistic to democracy, but how was it to be curbed without the erection of

superior power?"

Prior to the 1930s, the American trade union movement was also in its majority anti-statist. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was syndicalist, believed in more union, not more state power, and was anti-socialist. Its predominant leader for forty years, Samuel Gompers, once said when asked about his politics, that he guessed he was three quarters of an anarchist. And he was right. Europeans and others who perceived the Gompers-led AFL as a conservative organization because it opposed the socialists were wrong. The AFL was an extremely militant organization, which engaged in violence and had a high strike rate. It was not conservative, but rather a militant anti-statist group. The United States also had a revolutionary trade union movement, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW, like the AFL, was not socialist. It was explicitly anarchist, or rather, anarcho-syndicalist. The revived American radical movement of the 1960s, the so-called New Left, was also not socialist. While not doctrinally anarchist, it was much closer to anarchism and the IWW in its ideology and organizational structure than to the Socialists or Communists.

The New Deal, which owed much to the Progressive movement, was not socialist either. Franklin Roosevelt clearly wanted to maintain a capitalist economy. In running for president in 1932, he criticized Herbert Hoover and the Republicans for deficit financing and expanding the economic role of the government, which they had done in order to deal with the Depression. But his New Deal, also rising out of the need to confront the massive economic downsizing, drastically increased the statist strain in American politics, while furthering public support for trade unions. The new labor movement which arose concomitantly, the Committee for (later Congress of) Industrial Organization (CIO), unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was virtually social democratic in its orientation. In fact, socialists and communists played important roles in the movement. The CIO was much more politically active than the older Federation and helped to press the Democrats to the left. The Depression led to a kind of moderate "Europeanization" of American politics, as well as of its labor organizations. Class factors became more important in differentiating party support. The conservatives, increasingly concentrated among the Republicans, remained anti-statist and laissez-faire, but many of them grew willing to accommodate an activist role for the state.

This pattern, however, gradually inverted after World War II as a result of long-term prosperity. The United States, like other parts of the developed world, experienced what some have called an economic miracle. The period from 1945 to the 1980s was characterized by considerable growth (mainly before the mid-1970s), an absence of major economic downswings, higher rates of social mobility both on a mass level and into the elites, and a tremendous expansion of higher educational systems--from a few million to 11 or 12 million going to colleges and universities--which fostered that mobility. America did particularly well economically, leading Europe and Japan by a considerable margin in terms of new job creation. A consequence of these developments was a refurbishing of the classical liberal ideology, that is, American conservatism. The class tensions produced by the Depression lessened, reflected in the decline of the labor movement and lower correlations between class position and voting choices. And the members of the small (by comparative standards) American labor movement are today significantly less favorable to government action than European unionists. Fewer than half of American union members are in favor of the government providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed, as compared with 69 percent of West German, 72 percent of British, and 73 percent of Italian unionists.³³ Even before Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981, the United States had a lower rate of taxation, a less developed welfare state, and many fewer government-owned industries than other industrialized nations.

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