
Locke, Alger, and Atomistic Individualism Fifty Years Later: Revisiting Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America*

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Louis Hartz asked some very important questions in *The Liberal Tradition in America*. One that seems especially relevant in the aftermath of invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and to which I will point only briefly, concerns America's relationship with the rest of the world. Hartz wrote that America's "messianism is the polar counterpart of its isolationism," and that it had "hampered insight abroad and heightened anxiety at home." He contended that America had difficulty communicating with the rest of the world because the American liberal creed, even in its Alger form, "is obviously not a theory which other peoples can easily appropriate or understand," and that absence of the experience of social revolution in America's history lies at the heart of our inability to understand how to lead others.¹ Henry Kissinger contends that, in a post-cold war era, American exceptionalism with its rejection of history, extolling "the image of a universal man living by universal maxims, regardless of the past, of geography, or of other immutable circumstances," is a kind of innocence ill-suited to successful diplomacy in the emerging world order.² We talk a great deal about bringing freedom, democracy, and self-determination to the Middle East, but this hardly seems an apt description of what is happening on the ground. Do we have anything to teach? Hartz, who was quite skeptical about our ability to export the American liberal tradition, might still

have something useful to say about our interactions abroad, even in a post-cold war world.

This article will not focus on foreign policy, however, but on another aspect of *The Liberal Tradition in America*. This, broadly, is the dimension of Hartz's materialism, and the attendant role of the economic in American politics. Political scientists continue to face challenges as we seek to understand when and how economic performance and economic life chances matter in political views and outcomes. The relationship is certainly not straightforward or simple, and Hartz asked some important questions here. A discussion of Hartz's materialism will also lead us to uncover what such an approach misses.

Hartz described the liberal tradition as one of Lockean, atomistic individualism, wedded to Horatio Alger in the nineteenth century. He argued that the Whig-Hamiltonian-capitalists in the late antebellum era managed to "throw a set of chains around" the American democrat, in effect, selling the peasant-proletariat hybrid a bill of goods which became an ideological straightjacket.³ We were all simply hoodwinked by the Whigs, who wooed us with equality of opportunity – a materialist dream – while they themselves won the race. American political thought became fixed in time, both impoverished and static.

For Hartz, American political thought was remarkably homogeneous and consensual; self-evident truths were beyond examination. While the heirs of the liberal tradition reacted with hysteria to challenges from the left, the basic portrait painted was of

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1. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 286, 288, 305–6.

2. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 18, 805, 809–12, 832–35; qtd. on 833.

3. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, esp. 62–63 and 203–5. See the discussion in Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 264–66.

struggles that were not life and death ones.⁴ Although the Civil War has always served to challenge Hartz's consensus view, American political dynamics in the past thirty to thirty-five years are also offering a serious affront to Hartz's construct. As Sean Wilentz has recently noted, "The great weakness of Hartz's approach was that, as a unified field theory of American political thought, it turned politics in a modern liberal polity into fake battles fought with wooden swords."⁵

Writing during the cold war and at the end of the McCarthy era, Hartz accepted the premise common to far more radical theorists that ideas were the product of relations among social classes. We could describe his argument in terms of how America "missed the boat." Lacking a feudal past, there was no genuine aristocracy in America against which a nascent bourgeoisie could formulate its own identity and revolution; it followed that the American peasant-proletariat never developed a working-class consciousness during the rise and maturation of the industrial system. Having failed to turn to socialism during this key time, we were rendered immune to such appeals (though not from fear of them). Thus, it is not material conditions per se, but the class dynamics presented at key historical moments that mattered. The American peasant-proletariat had, in effect, become hermetically sealed off from foreign ideas and foreign appeals. The ocean turns out to have been a big deal in American political development.

Hartz's impact on developments in the field of political science has been extensive. The thesis of *The Liberal Tradition* generated a mass of new scholarship, responses including the republicanism thesis, discovery of feudal vestiges, and attempts at rescue including explorations of bipolarity in the liberal tradition, where serious disagreements were acknowledged, investigated, but nonetheless contained within a set of boundary constraints beyond which American politics did not venture.⁶ Hartz may have fueled the ten-

dency of scholars of American politics to look for key moments or turning points in political development – points at which a trajectory seemed to become fixed. *The Liberal Tradition*, through David Greenstone, had a major impact on the work of many graduate students at the University of Chicago. Hartz shaped the trajectory of my own work for quite a few years as I sought to better stipulate the relationship between economic opportunity and political beliefs, attitudes, and attachments.⁷ Hartz was also responsible for launching me on a lengthy exploration of Alger's role in American political culture – a role that is different, more conflictual, and, I think, more complicated than the one Hartz depicted.⁸

While I believe that there are certainly distinctive elements and various patterned narratives in American political discourse, I no longer think many scholars in our profession believe that American exceptionalism and its variants have much analytical purchase. And since Hartz wrote during a period taken with the idea of a single national "character," the datedness compounds. Hartz seemed to better suit an era in which social scientists talked about "false consciousness" or cooptation than one in which historians have helped guide political scientists toward a richer approach to the various ways in which individuals and groups can be active participants in the creation of political meanings and understandings, and not merely passive recipients of communications from elites.

I suspect that the notion of American "exceptionalism" had particular purchase during the cold war. When the meaning of America was formulated as an antithesis to the Soviet Union, distinctions with the old world, where communist and socialist appeals tended to be seductive through at least 1968, were highlighted over similarities. In a polar world, America was a pole apart. In the post-Soviet era, does America indeed look as exceptional?

Consensus and stasis have yielded to perceptions of conflict as the driving force in American political development.⁹ Institutions have returned to the foreground in the study of political change. Scholars of American political development have been honing new models and understandings of the relationship between institutions and the dynamics of political change. Historical institutionalists Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek have found that different patterns of development characterize different institutional formations, leading to conflict over norms, rules, and terms of control among them that have repercussions throughout the poli-

4. Is this arguably linked to the zeal with which civil liberties can be offered up, and highway signs urge us to report suspicious persons and activity, in the search for terrorists?

5. Sean Wilentz, "Uses of *The Liberal Tradition*: Comments on 'Still Louis Hartz after All These Years,'" *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 118.

6. 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; and the posthumous *Lincoln Persuasion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); see also David F. Ericson, *The Shaping of American Liberalism: The Debates of Ratification, Nullification, and Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). On feudalism, see Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law and Liberal Development in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). On republicanism, see, for example, J.G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

7. For example, Carol Nackenoff, "Economic Dualism and What It Means to American Labor Force Participants," *Journal of Politics* 45 (1983): 110–42.

8. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic*.

9. The works of Theda Skocpol, Ira Katznelson, and Charles Tilly are among those that have been particularly influential in this regard.

ty.¹⁰ Instead of an integrated political system, “relations among political institutions are (at least) as likely to be in tension as in fit and the tension generated is an important source of political conflict and change.”¹¹ Political actors can exploit tensions and contradictions that exist because of these institutional mismatches; in this context, there is potential for creativity by actors of all sorts.¹² Institutional intercurrency specifies “a political universe that is inherently open, dynamic, and contested, where existing norms and collective projects, of varying degrees of permanence are buffeted against one another as a normal condition.”¹³ American politics are patterned by institutions and norms, but these are dynamic; America is not somehow stuck in an ever-recurring drama.

The very notion of a liberal tradition as Hartz uses it is problematic. I have argued that a “liberal” tradition that stretches to encompass everything that Hartz tries to encompass ceases to have much explanatory power. I have also argued that variants on the “American exceptionalism” thesis are not likely to help us understand the ways in which the politics of a limited social welfare state were patterned in the United States, nor is American exceptionalism likely to help us understand meaningful political contingencies and possibilities.¹⁴ Even if we acknowledge Hartz’s astute observation that the social welfare policies of the New Deal era were chiefly pragmatic and never given a well-developed philosophical underpinning, it would be hard to contend that this explains the current erosion of many U.S. welfare state provisions since some parallel erosions can be found in Great Britain and Europe.¹⁵ Rogers Smith’s multiple traditions approach certainly better captures different and enduring narratives to which political elites can appeal in American politics.¹⁶ Furthermore, Hartzian alternatives better capture the extent to which “articulations of citizenship have always depended upon the exclusion of constructed and ascribed others.”¹⁷

10. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Institutional Intercurrence: Theory Building in the Fullness of Time,” in *Political Order* [Nomos 38], ed. Ian Shapiro and Russell Hardin, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), 140.

11. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “In Search of Political Development,” in *The Liberal Tradition in American Politics: Reassessing the Legacy of American Liberalism*, ed. David F. Ericson and Louisa Bertch Green (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39.

12. *Ibid.*; Orren and Skowronek, “Institutions and Intercurrence,” 140.

13. *Ibid.*, 139.

14. Nackenoff, “Gendered Citizenship: Alternative Narratives of Political Incorporation in the United States, 1875–1925” in *The Liberal Tradition in American Politics*, ed. David F. Ericson and Louisa Bertch Green (New York: Routledge, 1999), 137–69.

15. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, 260–66.

16. Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

17. Richard Iton, “The Sound of Silence: Comments on ‘Still Louis Hartz after All These Years,’” *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 114.

Because of the defects I have already mentioned, I no longer think as frequently about Hartz or his framework. However, there are two questions stemming from Hartz that fascinate me and seem to bear on what Hartz’s *Liberal Tradition* has to say for our times. *First*, what do changes in the U.S. economy and in the structure of economic opportunity mean for the durability of the American dream, and thus the Horatio Alger mindset Hartz identified? *Second*, what should we think about the recent and apparently deepening cleavages in American politics that do not easily correspond to economic or social class lines? I want to spend some time looking at each of these questions in turn.

QUESTION 1: THE STRUCTURE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ALGER MYTH – WHY OR HOW?

For purposes of discussion, let us suppose for the moment that Hartz was right in his description of a pervasive liberal-Lockean, Horatio Alger worldview in the United States. (I will return to further consideration of this claim later.) A key characteristic of myths is that they are nonfalsifiable. Alger offered a storybook truth about the vital role that one’s own effort, character, and mettle played in economic advancement. For Hartz, the ideology is impervious to significant transformations in economy and society. Political understandings, on the other hand, ostensibly bear some correspondence to lived experience, working out problems and tensions, and blending fact and fiction. These beliefs are at least potentially dynamic, not frozen. There are surely particular themes, symbols and tropes to which we recur, but they are repackaged, recombined, and reworked by different generations and different groups in various ways that have potentially different outcomes. New generations are never completely housebroken by what has come before. We are constantly reinventing our traditions in the various stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, incorporating new experiences and material. If Alger’s rags-to-riches formula (which was more frequently a formula about rising to attain comfortable circumstances in the fiction writer’s, as opposed to Hartz’s, rendition) is more than an American myth, there had better be some explanation for why it survives.¹⁸ For Hartz, beliefs remain constant even while becoming increasingly mythical. I think Hartz assumed, implicitly, that the economic pie kept expanding, and that the economy continued to offer enough opportunities for mobility to keep the storybook truth chugging along. The experience and expectation of sustained economic growth was certainly strong when Hartz wrote in the early 1950s, and remained fairly pronounced until at least the mid-1970s.

18. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic*, 53.

If belief in the availability of opportunity – and in the chances of rising through the ranks through one’s own efforts – serves as a kind of social lubricant, maintaining consensus, there is some evidence of brittleness in these beliefs in recent years. Hartz’s claim at least invited an important question: What is the relationship between conditions of material life and the persistence of the Horatio Alger myth? Pew Global Attitude surveys indicate that Americans remain considerably more optimistic about the improvement of their economic fortunes than their counterparts in most other places in the world. On the other hand, the Pew Global Attitudes Project reports in 2002 that when respondents were asked about the future of their nation’s children, Americans and Europeans were much less optimistic about prospects for the next generation than were Asians, especially Chinese, South Koreans, Indians, and Indonesians. Half of Americans surveyed by Pew thought that their children would be worse off when they grew up compared to how people were living today, despite the fact that these respondents also tended to believe their personal lives have improved over the last five years and were likely to improve in the next five. A higher percentage of American respondents (15 percent) reported there had been times in the past year they had been unable to afford food than did respondents in any advanced economy surveyed.¹⁹ What material underpinning did it take to sustain a belief in mobility, in the chance to attain at least middle class comfort? If Horatio Alger was central to the meaning of America, as Hartz would have it, has a post-industrial America undermined Americanism?

A great deal of ink has been spilled in the last few years in attempts to determine what is going on with the U.S. economy and what some of these changes portend. There have been announcements of (or calls for) the death of Alger in the process, and a good deal of reexamination of economic mobility and well-being. Analysis has centered on the growing gap between rich and poor; the growing gap between lifetime earning power of those with four-year college degrees and those with only a high school diploma or some college; slow job growth and especially weak middle-class job creation; the relationship between globalization, technological development and outsourcing, not only of blue-collar but increasingly, varieties of high-tech white-collar work; pension plan health and health care costs; the plight of the work-

ing poor; and the number of Americans whose economic position is stagnant or downwardly mobile. What is the import of this new commentary about Alger’s demise?

Princeton Woodrow Wilson School economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman wrote a column at the beginning of 2004 entitled “The Death of Horatio Alger.”²⁰ Krugman was elaborating on and seconding Aaron Bernstein’s commentary in *Business Week* a few weeks prior, entitled “Waking up from the American Dream,” in which Bernstein found the U.S. economy slowly stratifying along class lines.²¹ Bernstein, a Washington, D.C., based senior writer at *Business Week*, specializes in workplace trends, incomes, unemployment, and labor issues.

One factor contributing importantly to this stratification, argues Bernstein, is the steeply escalating bill for a college education. The number of students from impoverished backgrounds who get the bachelor’s degree – a degree that greatly expands lifetime income expectations – has been stagnant. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the premium employers pay for workers with B.A. and B.S. degrees over those with merely high school diplomas has risen over the last twenty years.²² Community college tuition aid has captured the attention of some politicians (such as George W. Bush and John Edwards), yet such an education generally does not produce four-year degrees. As costs for college education escalate, not just at elite private colleges but also markedly at state institutions, where some states have cut higher education budgets in the face of deficits, federal financial aid dollars cover less of the bill for the poor. The Pell Grant program’s maximum grant used to cover 84 percent of the cost at a public four-year college for the poorest students, but now, it covers only 39 percent.²³ Some schools have given up on need-blind admission. Jane Bryant Quinn quotes Tom Mortenson, a higher-education policy analyst, who terms this shifting of costs onto students at state schools “creeping privatization.”²⁴ According to *Newsweek*, two-year public institutions have seen a 53 percent tuition increase in the last ten years, and four-year public institutions have seen an 85 percent jump in the same ten-year period. These increases have run

20. Paul Krugman, “The Death of Horatio Alger,” *Nation*, 5 Jan. 2004, 16–17.

21. Aaron Bernstein, “Waking Up from the American Dream,” *Business Week*, 1 Dec. 2003, 54–58.

22. David Wessel, “The Future of Jobs: New Ones Arise, Wage Gap Widens,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Apr. 2004, A1, A5. According to the Economic Policy Institute figures cited by Wessel, the “premium for a college diploma” in terms of wages has jumped to 41 percent for similar men from 21 percent twenty-five years ago; for women, those with a four-year college degree earn 46 percent more than those with a high school diploma, a jump from 25 percent twenty-five years ago.

23. Jane Bryant Quinn, “Colleges’ New Tuition Crisis,” *Newsweek*, 2 Feb. 2004, 49.

24. *Ibid.*

19. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Pew Global Attitudes Project Report, “What the World Thinks in 2002: How Global Publics View Their Lives, Their Countries, the World, America,” 4 Dec. 2002: 10–11, 19–26. <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/165.pdf> (accessed 7 Mar. 2005). Among Americans surveyed, one-quarter reported they had occasionally been unable to afford health care in the past year, and one-third reported they had been occasionally unable to afford health care, clothing, or food at some point in the past year.

far ahead of inflation rates. The problem is quite extensive, and it is worsening. David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* points out that students from upper-income families are displacing students from middle-class families at prestigious universities throughout the United States.²⁵ This two-decade trend line in the class composition of the student population stems from steep tuition increases, the extent to which wealthy parents will go to make their children attractive to the best schools, and the effect of early admission programs that favor students who do not need to compare financial aid offers. As Leonhardt notes, “[a]s the income of college graduates has risen much faster than that of less educated workers, getting into the right college has become an obsession in many upper-income high schools.”²⁶

Another factor in the increasing class stratification of the U.S. is the proliferation of low-wage, dead-end jobs in the 1990s. Relatively well-paying manufacturing jobs continue to decline, and the Wal-Mart phenomenon continues to ruthlessly pressure competitors to cut labor costs. According to Beth Shulman, author of *The Betrayal of Work*, 30 million Americans make less than \$8.70 per hour, the official poverty level for a family of four. Many economists believe this is only half of what it would take for such a family to cover basic needs.²⁷ The number of Americans without health insurance continues to escalate. Children’s poverty rates exceed what they were thirty years ago.²⁸ As Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* notes, “One of the great achievements of the United States has been the high standard of living of the average American worker.”²⁹ There is significant reason to worry about the current and future state of that standard of living, and politicians on both sides of the aisle seemed to acknowledge this in their election year proposals in 2004. This did not mean they would support an increase in the federal minimum wage in 2005.³⁰

25. David Leonhardt, “As Wealthy Fill Top Colleges, Concerns Grow over Fairness,” *New York Times*, 22 Apr. 2004, A1.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Beth Shulman, “Low-Wage Work—America’s Broken Promise,” *Poverty & Race* (2004) http://www.prrac.org/full_text.php?text_id=989&item_id=9309&newsletter_id=74&header=Poverty+%2F+Welfare (accessed 9 Mar. 2005). Beth Shulman, *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans* (New York: New Press, 2003). Joan Oleck, “Horatio Alger in Trouble,” *Ford Foundation Report*, fall 2003, http://www.fordfound.org/publications/ff_report/view_ff_report_detail.cfm?report_index=456 (accessed 8 Mar. 2005). See also Bernstein, *supra* n.16.

28. Shulman, *Low-Wage Work*, 82, citing Richard B. Freeman, “Is the New Income Inequality the Achilles’ Heel of the American Economy?” in *The Inequality Paradox: Growth of Income Disparity*, ed. James A. Auerbach and Richard S. Belous (Washington, DC: National Policy Association, 1998); and Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America 2000–2001* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

29. Bob Herbert, “Theory vs. Reality,” *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2004, A21.

30. James Kuhnhehn, “Minimum-wage Hike Defeated,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 Mar. 2005, A3. Stephen Labaton, “Senate Re-

Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* provides a disturbing chronicle of the author’s inability to make ends meet in several low-wage jobs she held in different regions of the nation. Relocating to Florida, Maine, and Minnesota, Ehrenreich found employment at Wal-Mart, waitressing, as a nursing home aide, and working for a maid service. She offered a window onto the struggles of the people – mostly women – around her who could not simply return to Manhattan at the end of the author’s social experiment.³¹ Another recent book in a similar vein is David K. Shipler’s *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, which explores the phenomenon of the large portion of the 35 million people in America living in poverty who work – including many who work full-time.³² Shipler followed some of the people who figure in the book for as long as seven years, and, like Ehrenreich, conveys a rich sense of what it means to be without a car, without health insurance, and without a bank account as one seeks work.³³ Another is *Low-Wage America: How Employers Are Reshaping Opportunity in the Workplace*, by Eileen Appelbaum, Annette Bernhardt, Richard J. Murnane, et al. This book considers the employment effects of decisions by firms to restructure economically, especially the creation of dead-end jobs.³⁴ It is based upon case studies of 464 enterprises in 25 industries, and Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane point out that 29 percent of working families with children under twelve had incomes below the basic family budget for their communities. Among the workers most at risk for falling below the poverty line are those with high school educations (42 percent of all U.S. workers have never attended college), but those workers with some college education are also found among those at or below poverty line earnings.³⁵

Middle-class and highly skilled employees are also feeling the effects as companies choose to hire temporary rather than full-time workers and send software design and other technical jobs offshore. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “jobs that can be reduced to a series of rules are likely to go – either to workers abroad or to computers.”³⁶ While this did not lead Wessel to predict massive unemployment rates, he described a more likely scenario as the “barbell effect,” with a squeeze on jobs in the middle; thus

jects 2 Proposals to Raise Minimum Wage,” *New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2005, C2.

31. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

32. David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

33. Shipler discussed by Ron Suskind, *New York Times Book Review*, 15 Feb. 2004.

34. Eileen Appelbaum, Annette Bernhardt, Richard J. Murnane eds., *Low-Wage America: How Employers Are Reshaping Opportunity in the Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

35. Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane, “Low-Wage America: An Overview,” in *ibid.*, 1–29.

36. Wessel, “The Future of Jobs,” A1.

the wage gap between those at the top and those at the bottom of the wage/salary hierarchy might well grow. Again, “it is clear that to be a successful middle-skilled worker in the U.S. takes increasingly more schooling.”³⁷ The effects of employment instability in this high-tech sector are visible in many middle and upper-middle class communities. If “high-quality employment is the cornerstone of the economic well-being of America’s vast middle class,” there is a great deal of anxiety about the future of such high-quality middle-class employment.³⁸ Sandy Jencks at Harvard has pointed out that immigrants, too, are finding fewer paths to the middle class than in the past; the income spread between immigrants and native-born Americans is about three-times greater now than it was a century ago.³⁹

Career ladders at work – the notion of advancing over time with a single employer – are among the casualties of restructuring. Fewer and fewer Americans can expect to rise through the ranks as they continue with a single employer; fewer Americans can expect to spend their working lives with a single employer even if they wish to. In part because of the pace of technological change and obsolescence of job-specific skills, fewer can expect to spend their working lives rising in a single career track with different employers, either.

There is compelling evidence that a great deal has changed in the last several decades. Evidence offered by the authors of *Low-Wage America* indicates it is less likely that a “rising tide lifts all boats” than used to be the case. From 1979 to 2000, one-third of the increase in the mean household income went to the top 1 percent of households and another third went to the next 19 percent of households.⁴⁰ For more and more Americans, living as well or better than one’s parents is elusive; for increasing numbers, the standard of living is at best stagnant. The percentage of Americans who believe they will equal or exceed their parents’ earnings during their lifetimes is declining. And these responses are not unrealistic: upward mobility has been slipping since the 1970s. One recent study exploring how sons fared by contrast to the social and economic class of their fathers (measured by education, income, and occupation) found that while, in 1973, 23 percent of the sons whose fathers were in the lowest quartile on the socioeconomic scale had made it to the top quarter, only 10 percent had done so twenty-five years later. And while 63 percent of the

sons of fathers in the second highest socioeconomic quartile equaled or surpassed the economic standing of their fathers in the 1960s, this dropped to 51 percent in the 1990s.⁴¹ Between 1973 and 2000, average real income for the bottom 90 percent of U.S. taxpayers fell 7 percent; real income for the top 1 percent rose 148 percent and the income of the top 0.1 percent rose 343 percent in this same period.⁴² University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate James J. Heckman says “the biggest finding in recent years is that the notion of America being a highly mobile society isn’t as true as it used to be.”⁴³

Yale political scientist Jacob S. Hacker has recently argued, moreover, that the volatility of family incomes has increased significantly since 1970.⁴⁴ Hacker created an index of year-to-year volatility in family income from both government and private sector sources, controlling for family size (presented as a five-year moving average from 1970 to 1997). Families are, he argues, less secure than they were (reflecting changes in the kind of work available, erratic work experience, the fact that employer-provided benefits including pension plan and social security contributions are increasingly pushed off onto employees, and the fact that government programs providing benefits to poor and middle-class families have shrunk in absolute and relative value). Economic anxieties ensue. Hacker’s work with the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has tracked the same families for nearly forty years, leads him to conclude that the statistics frequently cited to assert that the economy is healthy don’t capture the economic risk and financial pinch that many Americans are feeling; at some points in the mid-1990s, income instability was nearly five times as great as it was in the early 1970s.⁴⁵

Alger has also been recently invoked by Michael Moore in *Dude, Where’s My Country?*, a book that has been quite popular with young adults.⁴⁶ Moore has a chapter entitled “Horatio Alger Must Die,” in the spirit of the 1970 album by Traffic featuring the old ballad about John Barleycorn, who keeps sprouting up

37. *Ibid.*, A1, A5.

38. Herbert, “Theory vs. Reality,” A21.

39. Christopher Jencks, “Who Should Get In?,” *New York Review of Books*, 29 Nov. 2001, 57–63. In this review of *Heaven’s Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy* by Harvard economist George J. Borjas, Jencks reports Borjas’s statistic that the wage gap between immigrants and native-born workers was, by 1998, three times as large as it was in 1910.

40. Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane, *Low-Wage America*, chap. 1.

41. David W. Wright and colleagues, cited in Bernstein, “Waking Up from the American Dream,” 58. For the 1990s, the measure was the economic standard of the parents.

42. This according to economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez and confirmed by the Congressional Budget Office, cited in Krugman, “Death of Horatio Alger,” 16.

43. James J. Heckman as quoted by Bernstein, “Waking Up from the American Dream,” 56.

44. Jacob S. Hacker, “Call It the Family Risk Factor,” *New York Times*, 11 Jan. 2004, A15. Hacker, “Middle-Class Tightrope: It’s More Dire Than the Numbers Show,” *Washington Post*, 10 Aug. 2004, A19. He finds, using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, that in the past three decades, family incomes have become two to three times more unstable. This is true even for well-educated workers and families with two earners.

45. Hacker, “False Positive,” *The New Republic*, 16–23 Aug. 2004, 14–17.

46. Michael Moore, *Dude, Where’s My Country?* (Warner Books, 2003).

despite all efforts to do him in. I am never sure whether Moore's call-to-arms (the image is admittedly a bit ironic in the context of *Bowling for Columbine*) breeds more cynicism and anger or more depression, but the book does not tend to offer many programmatic political suggestions. Moore wants us to realize that fairy tales are dysfunctional and dupe us – like Jim Jones's followers who, mostly willingly, drank the Kool-Aid at Jonestown. For Moore, we are addicted to "the Horatio Alger fantasy drug," while Enron, WorldCom, and similar scandals demonstrate that "we're being mugged by this lawless gang of CEOs."⁴⁷ In the meantime, average Joes and Janes, in Moore's view, are going far too quietly as they lose their jobs, their pensions invested in the stock market, and their savings, victims of corporate greed. But corporate greed, though it may well have been hurting workers in ways that he describes, is insufficient to explain the larger patterns in social and economic mobility, stratification, declining access to higher education, and other issues that pose more of a threat to the American dream. Alger never argued that everyone could become rich, nor did he pretend for a moment that the rich were necessarily virtuous (remember all the greedy and unfeeling squires and their sons?). The promise seemed, rather, that there were predictable paths to middle-class comfort and sometimes more would follow – especially if one had the proper character, which was a kind of skill that didn't go away with changes in the labor market.

What, then, of Horatio Alger? It is true that income disparities in the Gilded Age were very substantial, then grew smaller beginning in the 1930s. The trend toward narrower income gaps has now been reversed. Hartz wrote during the "bubble." But the Alger story, honed during the Gilded Age, was not about asset disparities between the rich and poor but social and intergenerational mobility. The American dream was about rising through the ranks – ending up in a better place than one began. Further, in Alger's arranged justice, sometimes this was accompanied by the rich being brought low – a potentially zero-sum arrangement if undeserving rich and deserving poor changed places. Now, upward mobility has fallen quite measurably. There are far fewer rags to riches stories today than there were in Alger's own lifetime – or even in most of our earlier years. For Krugman, it is "Goodbye, Horatio Alger. And goodbye, American Dream."

This is not to say that it is necessarily an inevitable transformation. Although competitive pressures in a global economy are quite real, governments and their actions also matter. Public policies matter; responses to Wal-Martization and globalization matter. Policies to "grow" (a miserable phrase that has been around since at least Clinton's presidency) good jobs, not just numbers of desultory jobs, matter. The

47. Ibid., 144, 138.

changes of the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first are troublesome for the American workforce. They generate anxieties. Populist attacks on corporate power and corporate abuses are on the rise, at least on the film circuit (the 2004 version of *Manchurian Candidate*, *The Corporation*, and *Fahrenheit 911*, to name just a few of the most recent). If the American Dream has been a key to the meaning of America in the hearts of many, we need vigorous discussion and exploration of alternatives to try to save it. It won't live just because an ocean may have once established a buffer between the new world and the old.

QUESTION 2: WHAT DO RECENT 'CULTURE WARS' AND MORAL CRUSADES, SUGGESTING DEEP AND PERHAPS DEEPENING CLEAVAGES, TELL US ABOUT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CLASS ANALYSES OF AMERICAN POLITICS? A TALE OF RED STATES AND BLUE STATES?

There is something very wrong about Hartz's secularism. Neither the Puritans nor religion more generally were very important to his story about American political thought. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press confirm that religion is much more important to American survey respondents than to people living in other wealthy nations.⁴⁸ Pew has also been documenting the deepening polarization of the American public.⁴⁹ This polarization is linked, I would contend, to the claims Americans heard about the 2004 election being "the most important" in our lifetimes because in this polarized electorate, competing moral visions are at stake. Values – and competing values – are very important to the discourse of American politics.

Following the publication of *The Liberal Tradition in America*, scholars repeatedly pointed to the important place of religious meanings and tropes in American political discourse and thought.⁵⁰ America was a

48. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Among Wealthy Nations . . . U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion," The Pew Global Attitudes Project. Report released 19 Dec. 2003, intro. and summary. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=167> (accessed 7 Mar. 2005).

49. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized," Report released 5 Nov. 2003. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=196> (accessed 7 Mar. 2005).

50. Some of the important contributions to this literature include Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) and *Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes* (New York: New American Library, 1970) and *Under God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990); Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox* (New York: Vintage, 1972); John Patrick Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Robert N. Bellah, *Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Robert Booth Fowler, *Religion and Politics in America* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow,

promise and destiny as well as a place; failure was collective treason as well as a matter of personal culpability. Sacred and secular rewards were conflated. Puritanism generated a special American telos – in Sacvan Bercovitch's words, the myth of America.⁵¹ The historical was more than man-made, and a religiously-infused story about the meaning of America helped constitute and give meaning to future experience.

Recently, both Jim Morone and Jim Block, in different ways, have worked to supplant the storybook truth about America told by Hartz, and have done a fine job of remedying Hartz's secularist defect. Morone poses a near-constant battle in American politics between those he calls Progressives and those termed Victorians. The former emphasize systemic sources of sin and urge social and political reform; the latter emphasize personal responsibility for sin and have their most recent flowering in Reaganism. These opposing political forces are moved by different senses of social justice, and are both locked in battles between us and them.⁵² Arguing that "[l]iberal political history underestimates the roaring moral fervor at the soul of American politics," Morone brings this moral fervor and these pitched, fierce political battles to life.⁵³ According to Morone, "American politics developed from revival to revival," and moral crusaders played a powerful if underappreciated role in American state-building.⁵⁴ Hartz's liberalism had little to do with morals or with virtue, but "[f]or better and for worse, moral conflicts made America."⁵⁵

Block posits an entirely different narrative of American history from Hartz, rooted in the notion of agency rather than liberty, and foregrounding America's Puritan religious heritage. Hartz, in Block's analysis, conjured away all traces of a religious heritage, missing the import of Anglo-American Protestant notions of the American self. Key struggles in American politics have been between those who believe liberty requires traditions, institutions, and authority to inculcate habits of virtue and those who seek to achieve liberal autonomy without such imposed constraints. Liberation and constraint have been interconnected in the American project; Americans forged their character as they worked out their relationship to authority in distinctive ways unavailable to their European forebears. Although Locke remains important to this project, Block argues that "the great theorist of agency civilization," for America was Hobbes.⁵⁶ Agency as understood by the Puri-

tans, Block argues, involves "individuals participating actively in shaping the worldly means to be employed for realizing divine and collective purposes . . . [a]gency exists only with reference to a principal, a designator, an author/ity."⁵⁷ Fissures in American political life can be better understood in terms of the tensions between notions of agency as natural and requiring no institutional coercion, and a sectarian Protestant vision of an exclusive religious community.⁵⁸ For Block, Americans have managed to ensnare themselves in forms of resubordination, and "as a nation we have lost our way."⁵⁹ Writing before 9/11, Block argues that there has been a collapse of the national narrative, the view that America stands "as a collective experiment in human liberty and as such a model and symbol for the aspirations of the world."⁶⁰

Culture wars frequently seem to dwarf or supplant economic issues in American politics. During periods I have studied intensely – the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era – there were a number of moral crusades in which moral issues came to serve as shorthand for what America needed in order to be restored to the right path. Everything from the obvious temperance crusades to white slavery, eugenics, the late suffrage campaign, Americanization, religious revivals, purging libraries of sensational fiction, the rise of the YMCA, orphan trains, the Boy Scouts, and the push for pure food and drugs serve as examples. I have read the Boston Unitarian-inspired Alger story (which made its first appearance in 1864, during the Civil War and not, as Hartz would have it, in 1840) as an allegory of the adolescent Republic, where the young person's rite of passage was vital to the welfare of the community; the character of the young and the character of the Republic were inextricably bound. Character formation was possibly *the* centerpiece of political concern if the viability of the Republic depended upon its virtue, as the Alger story would appear to suggest. And in Alger's universe, natural value is juxtaposed to artifice, and solid and simple virtues are juxtaposed to social pretense and to fancy, artificial manners.⁶¹ Even the Alger story, then, was not simply secular or materialistic, and participated in culture wars of the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

So Hartz missed important religious underpinnings of American political fervor. He missed the ferocity of the battles for the soul of the Republic and its youth. He missed how closely these issues were entwined. He missed how vital these struggles were for their participants, since he thought struggles over

1985); Wilson C. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

51. Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 81 and passim; 185.

52. James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), esp. Intro. and pt. 5.

53. *Ibid.*, 7.

54. *Ibid.*, 11, 32.

55. *Ibid.*, 13.

56. James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a*

Modern Self and Society (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 3, 15–18, 28, 30, and chap. 4.

57. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

58. *Ibid.*, 5–9, 29.

59. *Ibid.*, 1, 33.

60. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

61. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic*, 8 and chap. 3.

ideas in America were not life-and-death ones. He could not adequately specify the relationship between culture wars and liberalism. He did not have a good explanation for the deep divides that can open up in American politics, including around contemporary issues such as gay marriage, abortion, patriotism, and separation of church and state. While Hartz maintained that Americans do not think in terms of class even if they belong, in some sense, to classes, his sense of the political operates on a material plane and his notion of social class is materialist, based in the relationship to ownership and control of the means of production. It is no wonder that Hartz leaves us at sea (the pun on an ocean apart is intended) when it comes to recent domestic politics.

British journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge have attempted to resurrect the notion of American “exceptionalism” in their 2004 account of conservative power in America, *The Right Nation*. Micklethwait and Wooldridge argue that, if it could be said in 1950 that “liberalism is not only the dominant, but even the sole intellectual tradition” in America, American politics changed dramatically since the candidacy of Barry Goldwater in 1964.⁶² According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge, America stands apart from other advanced democracies in its tolerance for economic inequality, resistance to taxation and governmental spending, rates of incarceration, nationalism, attitude toward multilateralism and willingness to go it alone in the international arena, traditional moralism, and religiosity.⁶³ Although the authors mistakenly equate Hartz’s liberal tradition with big government, welfare state liberalism and likewise cede to conservatives monopoly rights over atomistic individualism, the authors believe America is much more unlike Europe and advanced industrial nations elsewhere than it ever was in the 1950s. To the extent we wish to acknowledge the import of changing directions in contemporary American politics, how much of this change could Hartz’s framework help us explain? Wouldn’t the Hartzian instead have to explain the emergence of some of the very powerful elements in the right turn as very little change indeed? Hasn’t the hysteria Hartz saw deployed against indigenous radicals (read: those who would redistribute economic resources) been displaced by a different form of crusading moralism under the name of Americanism? Some of the contemporary directions and dynamics described in the conservative “exceptionalism” of Micklethwait and Wooldridge seem difficult to fathom within the Hartzian framework. It is important to note that neither stasis nor consensus characterizes this account of an ascendant conservatism with multiple and often competing factions.

62. Lionel Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, qtd. in John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 43.

63. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *Right Nation*, chaps. 12–14.

Let me draw upon another astute piece of recent popular work, Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* to suggest an alternative to the manner in which Hartz thought American class dynamics worked.⁶⁴ This alternative moves away from Hartz’s largely materialist conception. Frank depicts an American public that can be mobilized to engage in angry class hostility while denying any economic basis of class such as occupation, birth, education, or income.⁶⁵ The current class divide in American politics, he argues, is between those who are seen as authentic – the most valuable cultural commodity – and those who want to speak for the average American but who can be cast as French wine-drinking, liberal, effete, intellectuals (and their lawyers) who do no useful work. The class war becomes a cultural class war, and conservatism becomes the doctrine of the oppressed masses who are outsiders. Conservatives are unpretentious and humble and Republican regardless of their wealth; liberals are rich and unconnected to the real America. Frank’s argument is that Democrats have ceded a traditional constituency to the Republicans. Some of the “red state” voters are voting against their economic and social interests on the basis of these other class appeals. Frank contends that this alternate notion of class warfare engaged in by these conservatives involves “the systematic erasure of the economic.”⁶⁶ Business is beyond politics; it lies in the realm of the natural, and the consequence is that these political class warriors downplay the world of work altogether.⁶⁷ Hollywood, New York, and Washington, Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, and People for the American Way represent the “elites” instead of Enron, Haliburton, and the Fortune 500. As Murray Edelman might have said, while those who have get real benefits, the rest of the country eats symbols.⁶⁸ I might suggest, however, that another way of thinking about this phenomenon is that economic anxieties are deflected into a different narrative – a narrative about who or what is threatening America’s core virtues. The “who” can be insiders or outsiders or both at once. A war mentality requires that good citizens suck up some pain and sacrifice as they gird for battle. Scholars who have been attentive to American culture wars are less surprised by – and less dismissive of – some of these political responses than are those who have been stubbornly materialist.

There is a potential spectrum of responses to disruption of lived experiences, and narratives about what is going wrong can blend reactionary and progressive critiques. Which responses are mobilized into

64. Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. (New York: Holt, 2004). See esp. chap. 6.

65. *Ibid.*, 113–14.

66. *Ibid.*, 127.

67. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

68. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

politics? Frequently, as E. P. Thompson taught us, there is an element in such responses that includes appeals to traditional values and appeals to a remembered (however fictive) “golden age.”⁶⁹ Whether these responses will form the basis of reactionary or progressive social critiques is contingent, and Frank’s tale of Kansas suggests the Republicans have been far more successful in forging narratives to appeal to the dislocated and disaffected than have Democrats.

Louis Hartz loses a good deal of the contingent in American politics. His story is one of inevitability, or near-inevitability. A consensus approach yields an impoverished understanding of political change and political conflict. Now is a good time to engage with Hartz. Politics is testing *The Liberal Tradition in America* in insistent ways. So, too, is the transformation of

the American economy. Is it possible, as Philip Abbott asks, that the Hartz detractor “overlooks or underemphasizes the capacity of a liberal society to contain, undermine, and redirect challenges without resort to support from other ideologies?”⁷⁰ We live in interesting times – times that underline, I believe, the weakness of Hartz’s analysis at home. And yet, as I began this article, and as Abbott appropriately asks, what are we to make of the post-September 11, 2001, American mission to bring democracy to the world? Abbott asks, “[m]ust a liberal community . . . be forever saddled with the peculiar limitations of its own perspective?”⁷¹ On this score at least, I would like to be in a position to reflect on Hartz’s insights and questions in another twenty-five years.

69. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 295, 57, 139, 177, 831–32.

70. Philip Abbott, “Still Louis Hartz after All These Years: A Defense of the Liberal Society Thesis,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (2005): 96.

71. Abbott, “Still Louis Hartz,” 105.