

The
American
Liberal
Tradition
Reconsidered

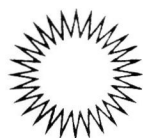
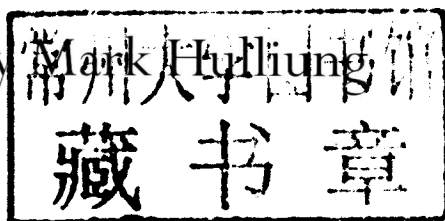
The Contested Legacy of
LOUIS HARTZ

Edited by **MARK HULLIUNG**

The American Liberal Tradition Reconsidered

The Contested Legacy
of Louis Hartz

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*The American Liberal
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Wilson Carey McWilliams and Lance Banning
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Preface

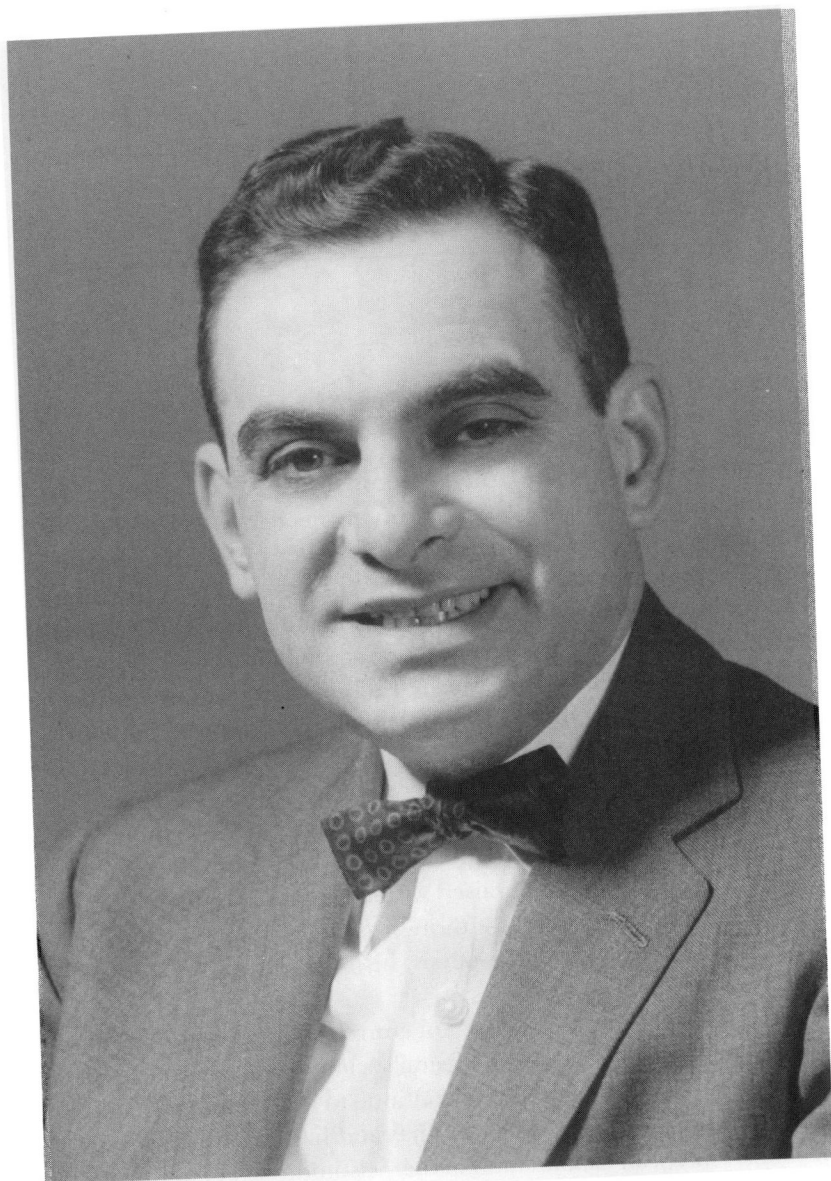
When I published a book in 2002, a number of scholars and graduate students responded by asking whether my project was one of resurrecting Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*. After publishing another book in 2007, the same question came my way. While the plain truth is that Hartz was not on my mind when I wrote either book, the queries did whet my appetite for an opportunity to express my views on Hartz.

I have recruited seven distinguished scholars to join me on this quest. On this occasion I wish to thank all of them and to express my sorrow that Hartz's devoted student Paul Roazen died shortly before the commencement of this project. Paul's absence from this book is regrettable.

If the essays included in this volume are frequently quite critical of Hartz, it is nevertheless undeniable that his book continues to generate specific scholarly questions, some raised within the pages of this volume. More generally, we may suggest that although many scholars of our time have abandoned Hartz's method of analysis, his concern for the fate of "liberal society" is still with us.

Our ties to Hartz have frayed but not entirely disappeared. We still wish, as he did in wielding his notion of a "liberal society," to understand America by studying it in comparative terms. We continue to insist, moreover, upon studying the extent to which America both has and has not lived up to its liberal professions. Finally, an examination of the vicissitudes of liberalism in America is immediately meaningful in our day—a time when the Republicans have so successfully stigmatized the word "liberal" that even the Democrats run away from it, in a dramatic reversal of a previous era when Herbert Hoover accused Franklin Delano Roosevelt of usurping the coveted label "liberal."

Whatever the contemporary standing of Hartz's book, we cannot escape from addressing his topic: the triumphs, failures, trials, and tribulations of liberalism in America.



Harvard University Archives, call # HUP Hartz, Louis (4)

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INTRODUCTION

Louis Hartz, His Life and Writings

Mark Hulliung

The Liberal Tradition in America, the book Louis Hartz published in 1955, figured from the outset as a highly influential work, a stimulus to further research, and a focus of keen controversy. A year after its publication the American Political Science Association bestowed upon Hartz its coveted Woodrow Wilson Prize; two decades later Hartz's famous study won the Lip-pincott Prize in recognition of its enduring interest. Even Hartz's numerous critics, it seems safe to say, must admit that the only study of liberalism since his book that has received comparable attention is the philosopher John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Among twentieth-century historical studies of America, possibly only the works of Charles Beard and the Progressive historians have elicited similarly sustained and impassioned attention.

A veritable cottage industry of studies of Hartz's famous book has flourished for decades and has yet to fade into the past. A number of his students, all of whom testify to his mesmerizing presence in the classroom, continue to hold professorships at leading institutions of higher learning. Especially in departments of political science *The Liberal Tradition in America* remains essential reading, most notably so in graduate courses on "American political development." The contributors to the present volume wish to offer their own respective understandings of the significance of *The Liberal Tradition in America* in the worlds of yesterday and today.

Hartz's career may be likened to a meteor that burst upon the scene, burned with extraordinary intensity, and then abruptly disappeared from the horizon. In 1940, at the age of twenty-one, he published his precocious essay "Seth Luther: The Story of a Working-Class Rebel."¹ In 1948, well before his thirtieth birthday, Hartz published his first book, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776–1860*. Then, having advanced only to his

mid-thirties, he brought forth his most noteworthy book, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*. By his mid-forties, in the year 1964, he was ready to publish his third book, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia*.

No one in the 1960s could have guessed that Hartz's flourishing career was all but over—that by 1974 his attachment to Harvard University would be severed—and that Louis Hartz would spend the rest of his life wandering the world, never again to publish a book. Born on April 8, 1919, Hartz died on January 20, 1986, at the age of sixty-six. We are left to wonder how much more he might have accomplished had his career not been cut short by the illness that plagued him from the early 1970s to his death.

Hartz's life outside the academy was one of travel in an endless quest for personal growth and insight. Born in Youngstown, Ohio, he was raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and, with the assistance of a scholarship financed by the *Omaha World Herald*, he matriculated at Harvard. Upon completing his undergraduate studies, he spent a year abroad in 1940, the first of his journeys outside the United States, the last voyage coming many years later, ending with his death on the streets of Istanbul, Turkey. Unwilling to be confined to an American perspective, Hartz eventually found the entire Western world too constricting. He died believing that the quest for knowledge could never be fulfilled unless sought on a genuinely global scale.

Each of Hartz's books was more comprehensive, expansive, and ambitious than its predecessor. How very intent he was upon painting on a large canvas may already be seen in his first book, which dealt with Pennsylvania. On the face of it Hartz was dealing with only one state, but his readers were bound to be impressed by his grand narrative arc, which began with the Revolution and did not halt until he reached the Civil War. Of equal or even greater importance, his specific message in *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought* was one that had implications for all of American history, including his own day. Against the conservatives of the post-World War II era who bemoaned the loss of the good old days of laissez-faire, Hartz proved that regulation had flourished in antebellum state governments. Thus the federal regulations and "mixed economy" initiatives of the New Dealers were extensions rather than denials of long-established American practice.

Bold though his first book might be, his second book on "the liberal tradition in America" was written on a much larger scale. "An interpretation of American political thought since the Revolution" was his daunting objective, an endeavor that was bound to fail, in his view, unless the investigator reached well beyond the confines of the United States. He understood that

to comprehend the political culture of America, and to draw any conclusions as to the existence and nature of “American exceptionalism,” nothing less would suffice than a sustained comparative analysis with Europe. Accordingly Hartz sprinkled his book on America with constant allusions to the histories of France and England. One of the courses Hartz regularly taught at Harvard was on European political thought in the nineteenth century, a course in which he assigned readings from primary sources and recommended such secondary sources as Élie Halévy’s *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* and Guido de Ruggiero’s *The History of European Liberalism*. Of course, the European writer to whom Hartz owed most was Alexis de Tocqueville, who had traveled to America the better to understand France, which inspired Hartz to travel to Europe to understand America.

The link between *Democracy in America* and *The Liberal Tradition in America* is explicit. When readers open Hartz’s book, the first words they encounter are a quotation from Tocqueville’s classic study: “The great advantage of the Americans is that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution; and that they are born equal, instead of becoming so.” Less certainly but quite possibly, Hartz’s next book, *The Founding of New Societies*, may have drawn inspiration from Tocqueville’s other renowned study, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. For in the notes of *The Old Regime* Tocqueville briefly suggested the kind of investigation that Hartz was to undertake a century later: the study of what happened to various “fragments” of European political culture when transplanted to other lands in colonial settlements.

Specifically, Tocqueville commented briefly on French Canada. “The physiognomy of governments,” he noted, “can be best detected in their colonies, for there their features are magnified. . . . When I want to discover the spirit and vices of the government of Louis XIV, I must go to Canada.” It was excessive political centralization and the resulting diminution of civic life that Tocqueville spied in France’s Canadian possessions, where, unlike in France proper, the Church and local notables were too weak to thwart the will of the royal administrators. By contrast, the English colonies in America were, he remarked, “almost democratic republics” and marvels of self-rule. “In Canada,” he concluded, “equality was an accessory of absolutism; in the British colonies it was the companion of liberty.”²

Intentionally or not, *The Founding of New Societies* took up where Tocqueville left off. In what proved to be his final work Hartz assembled a team of scholars, each an expert on one of various European colonial settlements that had transmuted over time into independent modern nations: South Africa, Canada, Australia, and Latin America, with Hartz himself providing

the chapter on the United States and also the three crucial theoretical and comparative chapters that framed the volume. The four chapters written by four experts on four areas of the world other than America stand as contributions in their own right, but the overall project remained unquestionably the offspring of Louis Hartz.

Hartz's argument in *The Founding of New Societies* was a direct extension of that set forth in *The Liberal Tradition in America*. If, as he asserted in 1955, it was the European middle class that settled in America, then in Australia, he added in 1964, it was the lower class that had broken off from Europe; and if "the United States enshrines Locke," then Australia enshrines "the spirit of the Chartists and of Cobbett."³ Every one of the "new societies" could be understood, Hartz held, by pointing to its European class origins and then designating the corresponding European class ideology that became an unchallenged national faith in its new setting: national liberalism in the case of America, national radicalism in that of Australia.

Both Latin America and French Canada were fragments from feudal Europe; hence their political cultures took social hierarchy for granted, observed Hartz. By contrast, the United States, English Canada, and Dutch South Africa were bourgeois, liberal fragments speaking in slightly different accents. As for Australia and English South Africa, they were radical fragments in the manner of the working-class, non-Marxist, radicalism of England in the early nineteenth century. No matter how much these countries located across the world differed from one another, they had at least one element in common: just as Hartz had earlier held in *The Liberal Tradition* that virtual ideological unanimity in America had blocked the creation of creative political theory,⁴ so now he generalized his finding for all of the colonial settlements: "It is no accident that none of the fragment cultures . . . produced a major tradition of social philosophy."⁵ In the absence of alternative ideologies, the reigning ideology of each country assumed the status of self-evident truth needing no thoughtful defense—or so Hartz maintained.

When treating the all-important topics of slavery and race, Hartz drew a strong contrast between feudal Latin America, on the one side, and liberal America, on the other. Shockingly, doctrines of slavery were harsher, he suggested, in "Enlightenment cultures" than in "feudal cultures," for in the latter the humanity of the slave did not have to be denied, whereas a country awash in a liberal beginning could only justify slavery by reducing its victims to property. Feudal societies, with their sense of hierarchy, could place the slave at the bottom of the social ladder, whereas a country practicing "liberal slavery" had to transform the slave into a thing, a possession pure and simple.⁶

Since the publication of Hartz's books, scholars have frequently expressed sympathy for what he said about slavery but rarely have they sided with his views on the consequences of abolition. The flip side for Hartz, but not for his successors, of the exceptionally vicious "liberal" defense of slavery was that "once humanity is conceded, the liberal ethic is more compulsively generous, since it demands completely equal treatment."⁷ For the next generation of scholars, influenced by the New Left of the late 1960s or the New Politics of the Democratic Party in the 1970s, it was obvious that the abolition of slavery was only the beginning of the struggle to end racism in America. Hartz himself, his admiring student Paul Roazen reported in 1990, "once said to me that he regretted neglecting the role of race in his *The Liberal Tradition in America*."⁸

Continuing in his final years to pursue investigations on an ever-larger scale, Hartz worked with uncertain success on a volume tentatively titled *A Synthesis of World History*. Only a handful of persons, it seems, know much about this final, unpublished volume, and those few who approach it do so in a spirit of tact and diplomacy. Hartz's student Benjamin Barber has remarked, briefly, that "in this synthesis Europe with its principles of rational technology and domination, and the non-Western world with its more pliant intuitive cultures and its saving devotion to inner values, were to be reconciled."⁹ Patrick Riley, who wrote his dissertation under the direction of Hartz, has made a noble effort in a journal article to find traces of rhyme and reason in a manuscript that seems to testify to the mental instability of Hartz's declining years. Despite Riley's best efforts, the final effort of Hartz appears to be an exercise in extreme psychological reductionism, wherein thinkers, religions, and cultures are deemed interchangeable, except that some are more active, others more passive. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Hartz's final thoughts are best ignored.¹⁰

The focus of the essays on Hartz written for the present volume is on *The Liberal Tradition in America*, the book that is without question his most influential work, the one to which students of American political culture have found themselves returning time and again over the last several decades. This does not mean, of course, that his other writings will be completely neglected in our presentations. His first book on economic policy and democratic thought in Pennsylvania is fair game for contributors who wish to discuss it as a forerunner of his most famous book or, alternatively, as an offering distinctly different in approach from his approach in *The Liberal Tradition*. Likewise, *The Founding of New Societies* is pertinent insofar as it may shed additional insight into Hartz's undertaking in his second book. There

are also several scattered articles written by Hartz that our scholars will avail themselves of as they see fit.

One final source is the volume published in 1990 by Paul Roazen, *The Necessity of Choice: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, which consists of the notes of students enrolled in one of the courses Hartz taught repeatedly over a period of some twenty-five years. Because this course was dedicated to an examination of European thinkers and events, it arguably provides useful background for understanding his European references and his comparative method in *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

Whatever conclusion one draws about *The Liberal Tradition in America*, whether one wishes to agree with Hartz, reject him, or revise him, there is no denying the importance of his book. Our eight contributors make no pretense to seeing eye to eye in their assessments of Hartz; they have differing and perhaps conflicting answers to the question of the value of *The Liberal Tradition* for fostering understanding of the American past or for throwing light on the present; different judgments to offer as to the worth or limitations of Hartz's method of analysis. But they are as one in their conviction that, more than half a century after its publication, there is still much to be gained from settling our accounts with *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

We shall begin with an essay that places Hartz in historical context and prepares the way for part 2, containing three essays attempting overall assessments of Hartz's argument. This will be followed by a third part wherein two scholars will test the worth of Hartz's analysis when applied to specific historical events and movements, to wit, the Founding and the history of American radicalism. Then, in part 4, two scholars will inquire whether Hartz's interpretations are of use in helping us understand contemporary America. Finally, the volume will close with a brief afterword.

NOTES

1. Louis Hartz, "Seth Luther: The Story of a Working-Class Rebel," *New England Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (September 1940): 401–418.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor, 1983), 253–254.
3. Louis Hartz et al., *The Founding of New Societies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 4, 11.
4. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harvest, 1955), 10, 141.
5. Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies*, 23.
6. *Ibid.*, 17, 50, 55.
7. *Ibid.*, 17.

8. Paul Roazen, introduction to *The Necessity of Choice: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, by Louis Hartz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1990), 14.
9. Benjamin R. Barber, "Louis Hartz," *Political Theory* 14, no. 3 (August 1986): 358.
10. Patrick Riley, "Louis Hartz: The Final Years, the Unknown Work," *Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (August 1988): 377–399.