

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Lecture 3: The American Political Tradition
February 12, 2013

- 1 American Exceptionalism and the Liberal Tradition
- 2 The Multiple Traditions in America

1 American Exceptionalism and the Liberal Tradition

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Democracy in America

What, if anything, makes America “exceptional”?

→ Europe as comparison case

- **Tocqueville**: Came to U.S. in 1831–32 to study its politics and society → understand France’s history and future
- Above all, Tocqueville was struck by Americans’ relative **equality** (material conditions as well as ideology)
- Causes of American democracy:
 - Protestant English culture
 - Availability of land
 - Middle-class immigrants (no lords or serfs)

Classical Liberalism

- In Europe, the first challenges to the old aristocratic/feudal order were justified by the ideology of **liberalism**.
- **Locke**: In the state of nature, men are **equal** and freely enjoy certain natural **rights** (life, liberty, property). Government is only valid insofar as it preserves those rights and is based on the **consent of the governed**.
- Ideology of the **bourgeoisie** (prosperous middle class): opposed to special privileges for aristocracy, but not to inequality of wealth

Americans Were Born Free

“The Americans were born free, instead of becoming so.”

– Tocqueville

- In Europe, bourgeois liberals had to fight revolution to overthrow old regime
- Liberals opposed on right by monarchists and on left by working-class socialists

Louis Hartz:

- America was a “bourgeois fragment” of Europe
 - No aristocracy, no poor—only middle class
 - No feudalism, no socialism—only liberalism
- “Irrational Lockean liberalism” (can’t imagine alternatives)
 - “Tyranny of unanimity”
- All conflict on liberal terms (e.g., liberty vs. equality)

The American Creed

“It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.” – Richard Hofstadter

- Claim: Americans are defined not by common heritage or territory but by common **values**.
- The “American Creed” (Lipset):
 - Liberty
 - Egalitarianism (of respect and opportunity)
 - Individualism
 - Populism
 - Laissez-faire

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Liberalism and Its Alternatives

- **Liberal Tradition View:** America is dominated, or even defined, by a single system of beliefs and values
 - Non-liberal elements of American politics (e.g., racism) are exceptions that are recognized as illegitimate/irrational
- **Multiple Traditions View:** The American political tradition has multiple competing strands, each of which has its own intellectual justifications.
 - Tension, even inconsistency

Civic Republicanism

- Where liberalism begins with **individual rights and interests**, republicanism begins with the **community** (*res publica*: public thing) and citizens' **duties** to it.
- Goal of politics is the **common good**, which is not merely the sum of individual interests but “the good of the whole.”
- **Homogeneity** of interests (e.g., people vs. ruler)
- Participation and deliberation of **virtuous** citizenry
- Liberty “restrained to render society one great family”
- Possible in large republic? (cf. *Federalist* 51)
- Influential during Revolution, later reform movements

Philosophical Pragmatism

- American philosophical movement originating in late-19th century America
- Scarred by Civil War and frustrated with outdated, absolutist dogmas (e.g., laissez-faire constitutionalism)
- All “truths” are provisional and should be subject to continuing scrutiny
- Reform through open-ended experimentation, deliberation
- Political and constitutional innovations of Progressive Era, New Deal

Ascriptive Hierarchies

How to account for non-liberal impulses in American politics?

- Myrdal's "American Dilemma": Racism is explained by ignorance, irrationality, or selfishness, but even racists realize it is illegitimate and contrary to "American Creed"
- Smith: **Ascriptive hierarchies** (relations of power and inequality based on race, gender, etc.) are an important part of American political culture
 - Maintained by intellectual justifications, and by appeal of "natural order" that gives meaning to social and political life
 - Politics shaped by **multiple traditions**, including ascriptive hierarchies and republicanism as well as liberalism
 - Contradiction, **conflict**, and reversals

Understanding American Political Culture

- Political culture can be understood as the set of beliefs, values, and symbols shared in common by a particular social group
- Culture both structures political life and provides a set of resources that political actors use to persuade, mobilize, and dominate others.
- Political culture need not be unanimously endorsed.
- The difference between the “liberal tradition” and “multiple traditions” theorists are partly traceable to their different purposes: contrasting the U.S. with other nations or understanding its internal diversity.

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Spring 2013

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