



## The International Context

The idea that American political culture differs fundamentally from the political cultures of Europe and elsewhere in the world has long been central to discussions of American politics. As we have seen, this so-called American exceptionalism thesis was first put forward by Tocqueville (see selection 5.1) in the 1830s. Later, it reemerged as part of the effort to explain why the United States—unlike virtually every other industrialized society—failed to develop a viable socialist or communist movement. In this essay, the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset examines the history of the American exceptionalism thesis and explains how America's distinctive political culture helps illuminate the peculiar nature of American liberalism and conservatism.

### Questions

1. Why, according to advocates of the American exceptionalism thesis, did the United States develop a political culture different and distinct from those of Europe? What role did the American Revolution play in the development of this unique political culture?
2. How do American conceptions of liberalism and conservatism differ from their European counterparts? How does the American exceptionalism thesis help explain these differences?

### 5.3 American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (1996)

Seymour Martin Lipset

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. . . ." [The] . . . nation's ideology can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. The revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings, as distinct from conservative

From *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* by Seymour Martin Lipset. Copyright © 1996 by Seymour Martin Lipset. Reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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. . . .

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 Crèvecoeur, 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.