

Understanding American Political Culture: Three Different Approaches

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Abstract

Political culture, on a large scale, determines how politics play out in real life. It influences not only what citizens think are legitimate actions, but also how they perceive political events. Meanwhile, political culture is indispensable to understanding the dynamics of American government and its foreign policies. This article is an effort to demonstrate how three notable but distinct approaches interpret American political culture: Elazar's subcultural account, Huntington's ideals-institutions tension, and Hartz's liberal-consensus thesis. Combined, these three theoretical strands help broaden and deepen our understanding of American political culture.

Keywords

American Political Culture, Federalism, Disharmony, Liberalism, Elazar, Huntington, Hartz

1. Introduction

What is political culture? Political culture is “the shared views, values, and judgments held by a population regarding its political system. It reflects how people view the political system as a whole and their belief in its legitimacy, rather than attitudes toward specific leaders” (Winkler, 2026). Elazar (1966) regards political culture as a particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is embedded. Political culture, like all culture, is rooted in the cumulative historical experiences of a particular group of people. Comparatively speaking, the concept of political culture encompasses a wider range of elements than political ideologies. It includes values, beliefs, attitudes and norms that lead to different political behaviors and expectations. In the American context, political culture often centers on ideas of liberty, equality, rule of law, and attitudes toward

the government.

American political culture, like any other political culture, is deeply rooted in American history, institutions, religion, education, and every citizen's daily experiences. One cannot truly comprehend real politics without understanding its political culture. Political culture in America has shaped the operations of the political systems at different levels, and there have been a good number of historical moments demonstrating the mysterious power of political culture. There also have been cases of political crises or reforms that can shift norms around rights, accountability, and collective actions. Conversely, enduring cultural assumptions can also affect the magnitude of political changes. It's evident that understanding American political culture is essential to the very understanding of then-current American politics and its institutional practices. In this short essay, I will focus on three unique perspectives held by Elazar, Huntington, and Hartz to showcase three typical but distinct approaches to the understanding of American political culture. Each of the three approaches, either civilizational or ideological, mainly selected for their relevance and consequence, represents a profound interpretation of American political culture. For example, one scholar agrees that Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* has continued to influence the way many Americans perceive American history, and Hartz's argument that individualism and defense of property rights have helped define American culture has been very popular among many American scholars (Kloppenber, 2001).

2. Part I Elazar: Marketplace vs. Commonwealth

Elazar's book *American Federalism: A View from the States* is a personal interpretation of American political culture "that many will find fresh, suggestive and provocative" (Fesler, 1967: p. 805). In his book, Elazar (1966) argues that two fundamentally contrasting American cultures are marketplace (bargaining for interest) and commonwealth (an undivided collective interest), respectively. This matrix of value concepts includes four elements (commerce with efficiency and agrarianism with legitimacy), and it is located between power (self-interest) and justice (this makes a good society). Efficiency means to use minimum resources to achieve the goals and it is measured by the term Commerce and related to power management; while legitimacy means achievement of the underlying values of the citizenry and it is measured by the term Agrarianism and related to attainment of justice and each of the four tendencies is pulled to the direction of Power or Justice and is also complemented by every other tendency (Elazar, 1966).

Resultantly, each of the three American political sub-cultures reflects its own particular mixture of the marketplace and the commonwealth. The *individualistic* political culture regards democracy as a marketplace, and through government, individuals may maximize their social and economic benefits; government is limited and organized for utilitarian reasons to serve private concerns. "Political life within an individualistic political culture is based on a system of mutual obligations rooted in personal relationships" (Elazar, 1966). Political parties in this sys-

tem serve as “business corporations” to maintain the system in an organized way; thus, party regularity is “indispensable” for coordinating individual enterprise and preventing wild individualism.

Different from individualistic political culture, the *moralistic* political culture stresses the commonwealth conception as the basis for a democratic government (Elazar, 1966). Politics here is considered a decent and great activity for the betterment of the commonwealth and politics is a public activity deemed for the public good and public interest. Individualism is tempered by the moralistic belief that public good or interest stands higher than individuals. Governmental power is legitimized in the name of protecting common interest rather than for private economic enrichment. Serving the community is the core of moralistic political culture. Party is not supposed to be too powerful, and the strong commitment to communitarianism makes the economic and social life of individuals more prone to external intervention.

On the other hand, the *traditionalistic* political culture is deeply rooted in an ambivalent attitude toward the marketplace, coupled with a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth. It reflects an older, precommercial attitude that accepts a rather hierarchical society as part of the ordered nature of things, authorizing and expecting those at the top of the social structure to take a special and dominant role in the government (Elazar, 1966). In this cultural pattern, government is treated positively but is used only to maintain the status quo. In this elitist-directed society, social and family ties are paramount. Parties in this pattern are much less important compared to the above two. Also, a loose one-party system is routine in this culture. Elazar defines America as such a mixture of different political cultures, and these three cultures could contribute to the configuration of the American political system as well as endanger the survival of the system due to their internal pitfalls (Elazar, 1966).

Elazar argues that it is the geographic distribution of American political cultures, as modified by local conditions, that has laid the very foundations for American sectionalism. In American sectionalism, complex entities combine highly diverse states and communities with common political interests that generally complement one another, both socially and economically. American sectional alignments are rooted in three great historical, cultural, and economic spheres into which the country is divided: the greatest Northeast, the greater South, and the greater West (Elazar, 1966).

However, this is not the whole story. Elazar’s study on Frontiers shows that continued migration in America has made these cultural patterns fluid and the values of different political cultures experience internal change (Elazar, 1966). For instance, individualistic culture could erode traditional social bases. Elazar argues that many traditionalistic attitudes have been transformed into bigotries designed to maintain the old racial caste system or unchallenged efforts to maintain the political status quo, by which men seek personal profit from the changes (Elazar, 1966). As a result, American political culture experienced a process of dynamic

syntheses and diffusion.

Elazar's analysis of American political cultures does make good sense. It not only provides us with a new microcosmic perspective to perceive America as a cultural entity comprised of geographically different cultural diffusions, but it also helps us understand the existing differences in each state's responses to federal policy-making. Meanwhile, the theoretical starting point he applies to differentiate "commerce" from "agrarianism" is somewhat autopsical and illuminating. However, the most important characteristic of American political culture that makes U.S. a distinct political entity from the rest of the world, i.e., American Lockean liberalism, in my opinion, is insufficiently addressed and he overemphasizes the relative importance of individual states in relation to an increasingly powerful federal government since the American Civil War.

3. Part II Huntington: Ideals vs. Institutions

Huntington plays a unique and significant role in the field of American political culture. One scholar claims that for about two decades, very few scholars have surpassed him in the studies of political development and comparative politics (Groth, 2009).

Huntington argues that a better paradigm of examining American political culture that makes American society unique is to look at the gap between the American ideal and its political institutions and practice. The importance of the gap is derived from three distinctive characteristics of American political ideal (Huntington, 1983).

Huntington begins his argument by analyzing the pros and cons of the three most prominent structural paradigms of American political culture. In the way he puts it, they are "the one, the two, and the many". The "one" refers to the fact that there is a predominant consensus on middle-class values in American society. The "two" means the Progressive Theory, which emphasizes the "class-conflict" character of American politics between two conflicting classes fighting for power and wealth, and the "many" sees America as a plural society in which competing interest groups struggle for their benefits (Huntington, 1983).

Huntington argues that these three paradigms are extremely helpful for understanding American society; however, they do not make America unique and different from the rest of the world because of their theoretical pitfalls and deficiencies. A more satisfactory perspective that makes American particularism stand out is to look at it in a moralistic way, for it is precisely the central role of moral passion that makes American politics distinct from the politics of most other societies, and it is this characteristic that is most difficult for foreigners to comprehend. For Huntington, this interpretation accurately captures the extent to which the pursuit of these ideals is surely central to the American political experience. And this gap, i.e., ideals versus institutions, Huntington (1983) argues, is the very thing that makes America become a modern disharmonic polity *par excellence*.

Huntington furthers his argument by analyzing how the American Creed shapes

American identity. He argues that the American Creed has been a critical element in defining national identity and in delimiting political authority, and it is this American Creed that makes Americans who they are. The American Creed has played and continues to play a central role in defining American national identity. For Huntington, this American Creed is indispensable and is the quality that makes America distinct from Europe and the rest of the world. The identification of nationality with political creed makes the USA unquestionably a unique nation upon the hill (Huntington, 1983).

For Huntington, America is totally dependent on such a tension between the two “I”s (Ideal v. Institution); without the tension, there will be no America. The tension is America’s distinguishing characteristic. It defines both the pain and the promise of American identity. Without that tension, there would be no Americans. More intriguingly, this oxymoron makes America more a hope rather than a disappointment because it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope (Huntington, 1983).

Based upon the above arguments, Huntington passionately defends the viability of the American Creed and its practices. He predicts that tension between the two “I”s will persist in American practices domestically or abroad, and historically Americans have made many attempts to relieve this tension through different combinations of moralism, cynicism, complacency, and hypocrisy (Huntington, 1983).

Huntington maintains that the course of American history has proved that Americans have held on to these ideas persistently and foreign ideas can never be alluring to Americans (Huntington, 1983). American power lies exactly in its persistence in pursuit of those ideas while he frankly admits that the effectiveness of liberal-democratic institutions can be easily discredited by emphasizing their pitfalls compared to the ideals on which they are modeled (Huntington, 1982). As far as American foreign policy is concerned, Huntington believes that USA has contributed greatly to the global expansion of democracies, but he cautions against American intervention in non-Western cultures. He concludes that America’s dilemma lies in America’s effort to enhance liberty at home by limiting the power of the government and promoting liberty abroad by expanding that power (Huntington, 1983). Nonetheless, Huntington’s ideas-vs.-institutions analysis is not without any pitfalls. For instance, some scholars argue that Huntington, in part, has repeatedly confused the notion of organization with institutionalization (Groth, 2009).

4. Hartz: *The Liberal Tradition in America*

The word “liberalism” to Hartz means individual liberty, equality, capitalism and a free market. Hartz argues that America has been a practically “liberal” society since its inception, and the liberal ideology has been extremely strong ever since.

Where does this liberal tradition come from and how is American political cul-

ture imbued with such a tradition then? When many European nations were modernizing themselves, they had to confront feudalism, but America was an exception and it was born to be a liberal nation. Hartz argues that the liberal tradition in America was a natural consequence of a phenomenon (Hartz, 1955) while Tocqueville, in his seminal book *Democracy in America*, observed that 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 (Tocqueville, 2002).

As a matter of fact, the founding principle of America itself is a betrayal of the past, a past that was both feudal and oppressive, like old Europe. Hartz argues that since the Mayflower, America has become an exception, a land of ideals that could not be achieved in Europe without painful and bloody struggles. On the other side of the Atlantic, America became a new canvas of political design on which the founding fathers could paint their ideals by breaking the old shackles of oppressive European political culture. Oppressive ideologies lost ground in America. American exceptionalism naturally becomes an engrained orientation and engraved practice in American society. The unanimity of strong pride in the “American Way” has been inherited by generations (Hartz, 1955).

This liberal tradition, according to Hartz, however, could not escape its innate flaws. According to Hartz, the flaw in American liberalism lies in the fact that USA has never had a real conservative tradition (Hartz, 1955). To him, the danger of the American liberal tradition lies in its intolerance in the form of nationalism towards a diverse world with different preferences, i.e., a craze for unanimity. This conformitarian craze is fueled by the explosive power of modern nationalism and has become more and more profound (Hartz, 1955). This belief of desiring unanimity, when being challenged from without by heresy, will transform eccentricity into sin and dissent into danger of subversion and betrayal, and hysteria against them was much greater than anywhere else (Hartz, 1955).

Senator McCarthy’s hysteria against pro-communism groups and Reagan’s labeling of the Soviet Union as an evil empire all attested to this worry. The flaw of this parochialism can be attributed to the misleading argument over whether Americans should stress solidarity or conflict by advancing a false set of alternatives (Hartz, 1955).

Another dark side of the liberal tradition of America lies in its “messianism” toward the rest of the world. This “messianism” regards the “American Way” as the absolute value. In real life, it could present itself as “imperialism” as seen by other nations. Americans have long dreamed of themselves as emancipators of the world. Americans have long viewed themselves as saviors at the very moment that they have become isolationist (Hartz, 1955).

Such an absolute American national morality is inspired either to withdraw from alien things or to transform them. Meanwhile, this American messianism drives Americans to depict opponents not merely as such but as evil, as devils deserving of destruction by worthy Americans, which was well evidenced by the Vietnam

War, military intervention against Nicaragua, Trinidad, and Chile's President-elect Allende. So, to Hartz, without outside challenge, American liberalism lost its ideological rigor; it became immobile, irrational, absolute, and unthinking and sometimes fights against its own shadow (Hartz, 1955).

However, Hartz does give much credit to the value of protection and development of personality in liberal America, and he emphasizes that "the hope for a free world surely lies in the power for transcending itself inherent in American liberalism" (Hartz, 1955).

Hartz provides a sharp and enlightening analysis of American political culture. His argument on the American liberal tradition has been well reflected inside and outside America. Nonetheless, the unique characteristic of the American liberal tradition, which takes hard-fought values for granted, makes it hardly understood by the rest of the world, who would have to struggle harder to achieve their ideals. Hartz's theory is well-rounded but, at the same time, like many theories, could not escape from being defective. Kloppenberg (2001) argues that Hartz's liberal theory only provides an inadequate account of American history and Hartz misses the other roles played by democracy, religion, race, ethnicity, and gender in American politics. As a result, Hartz misunderstands the changing dynamics of the democratic struggle that has stoked American social and political conflict in the past three centuries. Kloppenberg (2001) also pointed out that Hartz's thesis should not be treated as a source of timeless truths about America, but should be put in the context of the early post-World War II era. In addition, Hartz's thesis can't explain why liberalism and racism can grow side by side in the American political culture (Smith, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Elazar, Huntington, and Hartz all presented their own unique interpretation of American culture, which is key to the very understanding of American political practices. By contrast, Elazar tends to view American political culture as a relationship between states and the federal government, while Huntington inclines to interpret American culture from a disharmony between ideals and institutions. Hartz, on the other hand, perceives American political culture in light of the tradition of liberalism, while advocating American exceptionalism and its unique role in the history of democracy. These three approaches, different as they may sound, as a matter of fact, share a consensus that American core values are the fountainhead of American exceptionalism. The strength of American politics lies in its long liberal tradition, a strong belief in the American Creed, and a benign struggle between ideals and its practices. These three unique perspectives, plus many others like pluralism and elitism, contributed greatly to our better understanding of the strength and limitations of American political culture and its embodied institutions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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