

Louis Hartz's Fragment Thesis

ALTHOUGH it has nothing to say about New Zealand specifically, *The Founding of New Societies*¹ by Louis Hartz and associates is a book which should interest students of New Zealand history. Several authors contribute to this volume, each writing an essay on the history of a colonial European society; viz., the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Latin America. However the core of the book is a general theoretical essay by the American historian and political theorist, Louis Hartz, in which he deals with these 'new societies' as a group. What Hartz has attempted to do is develop a theory which accounts for certain peculiar features of the political history of all the new nations, and if there is anything in his ideas, they should be applicable to New Zealand. Before such a task is attempted, however, it may be useful to consider how successful Hartz has been in applying his thesis to some of the societies he and his colleagues have already considered.

In *The Founding of New Societies* Hartz has elaborated and extended a thesis which he originally applied to the United States alone in an impressive and influential book entitled *The Liberal Tradition in America*. The key to an understanding of American political history, Hartz argued in the earlier book, lay in the absence of a feudal stage in the American past. In particular, the weakness of 'the feudal structure and the feudal ethos' explained the lack of a 'genuinely revolutionary tradition' and a powerful socialist movement in the United States. Marx was wrong when he attributed the emergence of socialism to 'the objective movement of economic forces. Actually Socialism is largely an ideological phenomenon arising out of the principles of class and the revolutionary liberal revolt against them which the old European Order inspired.'²

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¹ Louis Hartz, with contributions by Kenneth D. McRae, Richard M. Morse, Richard N. Rosecrance, and Leonard M. Thompson, *The Founding of New Societies; Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia*, New York, 1964.

² Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America; an Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, New York, 1955, p. 6.

In *The Founding of New Societies* Hartz argues again that it is the absence of various aspects of traditional European culture in the new European societies which has largely determined the course of their political development. The new societies, he asserts, are best understood as 'fragments' of European culture. In Europe 'a peculiar political contagion' has been at work which arose out of feudalism. The feudal order and its remnants inspired anti-feudal, class-conscious ideologies on the one hand and conservative ideologies based on nostalgia for the corporate past on the other.

But when fragments of this European order have established themselves outside Europe a kind of ideological immobility has set in. Without feudal institutions and values to react against or become nostalgic for, Americans have never developed a 'sense of class' or a 'spirit of revolution'. The whole of American political development has occurred within a liberal bourgeois consensus, and the same is true of other 'bourgeois fragments' such as English Canada and Dutch South Africa. French Canada and Latin America are 'feudal fragments' which have failed to develop along European lines because the feudal world was not transplanted there in its full complexity. The urban sections of feudal society were too weak and the clerical and aristocratic influences too strong to allow a powerful anti-feudal tradition to become established.

Finally, Australia is a 'radical fragment', the product of proletarian migrations from post-industrial Britain. In Australia 'the spirit of the Chartists and of Cobbett' triumphed in the early nineteenth century, and neither feudal or bourgeois ideologies on the right, nor doctrinaire socialism on the left have been of significant import. The egalitarian ethos of the working class has been as pervasive in Australia as the individualistic ethos of the bourgeoisie in the United States, and the Liberal and Labour parties both work within it.

It is not difficult to find flaws in a thesis as bold and as sweeping as this one. Hartz's view of European history, Leonard Krieger has written, is 'too perfect. It is reminiscent of a Rube Goldberg mechanism in which a fat nobleman opens a door at one end of a corridor and sets off a chain reaction which explodes Nicholi Lenin out of the door at the other end.'³ Much the same sort of complaint could be made of Hartz's approach to Australian or American history. In the case of America, for example, Hartz has surely exaggerated the extent to which the early settlers cast off their feudal heritage and created a society that was 'born equal'. 'God Almighty, in his most holy and wise providence,' Governor John Winthrop explained to the first settlers of Massachusetts, 'hath so disposed of the condition of man-

³ Leonard Krieger, 'A View from the Farther Shore', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, V (1962-63), 269.

kind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor; some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection.'⁴ Apparently most seventeenth century New Englanders, living out their lives in tightly-knit village communities, regularly electing their social superiors to positions of power, and rarely challenging the authority of church or state, agreed.⁵

Hartz can well reply to this type of criticism, however, that it amounts to mere quibbling; that his thesis does not attempt to account for everything that has occurred in the new societies but to provide one key insight into their fundamental characteristics. What we must ask of the fragment thesis is not whether it tells us the whole truth but whether it contains an essential truth. Does the concept of 'fragment societies' provide us with a useful framework for the comparative study of European colonial societies? This question will be considered here as it applies to Australia and the United States, and with particular reference to the relative strength of proletarian radicalism in the two countries.

The core of the fragment thesis is the idea that the political development of new societies is largely determined by the cultural heritage transmitted from Europe by the first settlers. Hartz allows room in his scheme of things for other factors. In the case of the United States, he warns in *The Liberal Tradition* that 'we must not assume that this ideological victory [i.e. of bourgeois liberalism] was not helped forward by the magnificent material setting it found in the New World'.⁶ Easy access to land for small holders and, later, high wages for working man certainly played a part in the victory of 'the liberal idea'. However these factors are subsidiary ones, according to Hartz. They merely 'helped forward' a process which was fundamentally a product of cultural fragmentation.

Now Hartz was not, of course, the first historian to suggest that the cultural patterns established in the settlement colonies by the early migrants had an important impact on the subsequent history of these societies. Nor was he the first to note that the cultural baggage which the early settlers brought with them to the colonies varied from one case to another. In a seminal article on the American and Australian labour movements published in 1928, for example, Carter Goodrich noted that 'the rebels who set the American tradition came very largely from a pre-industrial society [whereas] . . . those who

⁴ John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity', reprinted in Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans: their Prose and Poetry*, New York, 1956, p. 79.

⁵ Richard C. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town, The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*, New York, 1970; Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the 18th Century*, New York, 1970.

⁶ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, p. 17.

went out to Australia left an England in which the evils of industrialism had had time to display themselves and in which the counter-movements of trade unionism and labour legislation had already begun.⁷ This is very much Hartz's central point.

Goodrich, however, noted a number of other factors which helped to explain the relative strength and radicalism of the Australian labour movement as against the weakness and conservatism of American trade unionism. He pointed to the enormous economic power of the great American corporations and to the entrenched political power of the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States. He noted the ethno-cultural heterogeneity of the American working class as compared to the relatively homogenous background of Australian workers. He showed that Australia was far more urbanised than the United States, and that it had proportionately fewer small landowning farmers and a larger rural proletariat. Forming a larger proportion of the total population, he concluded, the wage-earners of Australia were in a better position than their American counterparts to organize and assert their strength.

Thus Goodrich identified a number of factors which help account for the relative strength of working class radicalism in Australia and its weakness in the United States, and he by no means exhausted the subject. Hartz, on the other hand, insists that one factor, cultural fragmentation, was all-important. Why, we may ask, should so much emphasis be placed on this single point? Is not the more conventional multi-variable approach adopted by Goodrich more convincing? Hartz nowhere offers any satisfactory answer to this sort of question.⁸

Furthermore, the fragment thesis does more than merely assert the primary importance of cultural fragmentation as an influence on the history of settlement colonies. Hartz argues that the conditions in which the new societies were born have determined the course of *all* future developments in them; that new societies are in some way imprisoned by their origins. Even in the middle of the twentieth century the United States remains a 'liberal' fragment and Australia a 'radical' one.

At this point the argument seems to have gone beyond mere exaggeration. Can we really accept a system of classifying the societies of the modern world which puts contemporary Australia and the United States in entirely separate and distinctive categories? Does it make sense to describe the political cultures represented by Nixon and McGovern on the one hand and McMahon and Whitlam on the other as 'liberal' in the one case and 'radical' in another?

⁷ Carter Goodrich, 'The Australian and American Labour Movements', *Economic Record*, IV (1928), 203.

⁸ Hartz does discuss the problem of 'single factor history' in *The Liberal Tradition*, pp. 20-23.

In the 1920s, when Carter Goodrich compared and contrasted the Australian and American scenes, Hartz's analytical framework might well have seemed more serviceable. To an American in the era of Calvin Coolidge, Australia might well have seemed a strange and radical place. Since that time, however, Australia's conservative political parties have enjoyed a long period of uninterrupted power and if one can make such generalizations with any meaning at all, surely bourgeois values are in the ascendancy in contemporary Australia. In the United States, on the other hand, the New Deal of the 1930s ushered in a flood of social legislation, federal intervention in the economy on an unprecedented scale, the rise of the C.I.O. and mass production unionism, and to some extent, the realignment of partisan loyalties along class lines. By the era of Eisenhower and Menzies, it seems not unreasonable to say that the social and political systems of the two countries displayed a degree of 'convergence'.

Hartz however will have none of this. The great depression may have generated important political and social changes in the United States but the critical point for Hartz is that these innovations were not carried out in the name of socialism or as an avowedly radical attack on American political traditions. The essentially liberal and moderate character of the New Deal, Hartz suggests, was masked by the fact that its only really dangerous opponents were on the right rather than the left.

Roosevelt sounded more radical than he in fact was because he was forced only to debate with Hoover and not with the socialist Norman Thomas. In truth no deep ideological divide separated Roosevelt and Hoover and the most notable ideological phenomenon the New Deal years was the continued weakness of socialism, despite the great depression.⁹

Most historians would agree with Hartz that the reforms sponsored by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s were moderate or non-revolutionary in character, but could not the same be said of the British Labour party's legislative programmes under MacDonald, Attlee, and Wilson? The trend towards the managed economy and the welfare state has been universal in the west during the twentieth century and, in the last analysis, is it a matter of fundamental importance that in the United States socialistic reforms were introduced under the banner of saving capitalism, whereas elsewhere capitalism was saved by men who claimed to be socialists?

Perhaps, until the 1940s at least, British politicians were more given to ringing statements of political principle, whether conservative, liberal or socialist, than their counterparts in the United States or Australia. Hartz may be correct when he suggests that the tendency

⁹ *ibid.*, ch. x.

to stake out distinctive ideological positions is in some sense 'contagious', that a Burke will inspire a Paine, and so on. When it comes to matters of practical policy, however, were Churchill and Attlee more deeply divided than Roosevelt and Hoover, or Menzies and Evatt?

A fundamental weakness in the fragment thesis is apparent here, involving the relationship between ideology and rhetoric on the one hand, and social structure and political practice on the other. Hartz uses terms like 'Lockian', 'liberal' and 'radical' to refer to both ideological persuasions and social and political systems. One does not have to be a Marxist to believe that important relationships link these phenomena but is ideology always a perfect reflection of social and political reality? The weight of tradition in a particular country might require that a politician stress his devotion to capitalism, socialism, or an ill-defined egalitarianism. What seems more critical in the final analysis are the problems politicians face and the policies they choose and these may be quite similar even if described differently.

Richard Hofstadter has made the same kind of point in a commentary on the way in which Hartz and other like-minded historians have dealt with the American Civil war. This conflict, Hofstadter points out, has been an embarrassment to those historians who have emphasised the role of ideological and social consensus in American history, and they have responded to this difficulty by stressing the failure of the combatants to produce radically different political theories. 'One may differ as to whether to call the impassioned arguments of the North and South "ideological differences",' Hofstadter writes, 'but if this was not an ideological conflict (and I think it was) we can only conclude that Americans do not need ideological conflict to shed blood on a large scale.'¹⁰

If we *are* to measure the depths of social and political divisions by reference to the ideology and rhetoric of the contending parties and the extent of social and political change by the degree to which novel political ideas were employed, then we will need a more subtle approach to ideology than that employed by Hartz. Once again the New Deal will serve as an example.

In the 1930s both New Dealers and conservative anti-New Dealers declared themselves in favour of, among other things, capitalism, national unity and individual liberty. When one looks closely at the way in which conservatives and liberals used these concepts, however, one finds little consensus — and this is hardly surprising given the depths of feeling which the New Deal aroused on both sides.

Capitalism, as portrayed by American conservatives in the 1930s, was essentially a 'natural' self-regulating system which thrived on maximum individual enterprise and withered under the impact of

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington*, New York, 1968, p. 461.

government interference.¹¹ New Dealers, on the other hand, constantly derided the credo of rugged individualism, compared the American economy to a sick man in need of a surgeon or a machine in need of major repairs, and stressed the need for deliberate government intervention and control. Capitalism could and should be saved, the New Dealers certainly said often enough, but the idea that recovery would occur 'naturally' they scorned as 'recovery by faith' (James A. Farley), leaving the job to 'chance and private experimentation' (Donald Richberg), or 'a superstition that the American soil was mysteriously blessed with every kind of immunity to grave economic maladjustments . . .' (Franklin Roosevelt).¹² It is not unreasonable to point to the New Dealers' public commitment to the restoration of capitalism in order to demonstrate that they were neither socialists nor revolutionaries. Nevertheless a rather deep divide separated men like Herbert Hoover who continued to applaud the glorious achievements of individual enterprise in America throughout the New Deal years and, on the other hand, men who derided confidence in free market mechanisms as 'superstitions'.

National unity and social harmony, according to the New Deal's right wing critics, were also phenomena which would occur naturally as long as demagogues did not stir up class antagonisms deliberately. President Roosevelt and his associates also appealed for national unity on numerous occasions but it was to be a unity based on an acknowledgement that distinct group and class interests existed and must be reconciled. The New Deal's rhetoricians were constantly appealing to farmers and workers, employers and employees, consumers and producers, to work together for the common good. National unity, like a stable economy, was something which required deliberate effort, supervision, and coordination, as, for example,¹³ through the National Recovery Administration.

Individual freedom, according to anti-New Deal conservatives, was to be secured primarily by restricting the powers of government. To the New Dealers, on the other hand, freedom from the oppression of government was meaningless without freedom from exploitation and freedom from want. Freedom must be guaranteed today, Donald Richberg wrote in 1935, 'not by letting people alone, but by making

¹¹ For an example of this viewpoint see the attack on the New Deal by John W. Davis, former Democratic presidential candidate, *New York Times*, 28 February 1934.

¹² *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 2nd sess., p. 3246; *ibid.*, 1st sess., p. 4839; Franklin Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel J. Rosenman, 13 vols., New York, 1938-50, IV, 338-9.

¹³ See, for example, speeches by Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, *New York Times*, 10 May 1933; Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, *ibid.*, 5 October 1933; President Roosevelt, *Roosevelt Papers*, II, 156-7, 385-7.

sure that they are so organized for cooperative action that the continuous interchange of necessary products and services will not break down and leave most people theoretically free but practically deprived of freedom to earn a living'.¹⁴

Thus the great depression generated not only social and political divisions of a familiar kind in the United States, but also ideological cleavages which reflected these divisions. It is true enough that the debate over positive government was conducted in peculiarly American terms by New Dealers and anti-New Dealers, but should the differences between them be dismissed as inconsequential for that reason? Does the weakness of socialism and European-style conservatism in the United States mean that an ideological consensus exists in America and has always existed, or rather that Americans have developed their own ways of expressing their differences?

The Liberal Tradition in America and *The Founding of New Societies* make interesting reading despite their weaknesses and despite Hartz's elliptical and opaque prose style. They deal with large and important questions, they abound with useful and occasionally brilliant insights, and they will continue to stimulate thought, if not to win universal acclaim. While the fragment thesis is provocative it is not, however, in the last analysis satisfying. One can accept the idea that out of the attitudes and values of the first generations of settlers there arose certain traditions which have had a significant impact on the history of new societies. It is difficult to believe, however, that these traditions would have remained alive had not economic, social and political conditions been favourable, and it is doubtful to what extent they *have* remained alive. Above all we cannot accept a system of historical analysis which assumes an identity between socio-political systems and ideologies, and which implies that the only ideological divisions which really matter are those which emerged in Europe.

There is undoubtedly value in Hartz's technique of looking at national histories in the light of elements that are absent as well as those that are present. This technique may be particularly appropriate to Australian and New Zealand history, for if the United States lacks a feudal past, consider all the things that have *not* happened in the Antipodes. We have experienced no armed struggle for independence, we have not suffered the agonies of slavery nor foreign invasions, we have been spared many of the regional, religious, linguistic and ethnic conflicts and divisions which have troubled other countries — one could go on and on. Perhaps all these 'missing elements' account for the rather passionless quality of political life in Australia and New Zealand.

¹⁴ *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 1st sess., p. 2716.

Historians, however, have traditionally been concerned with change, and a system of historical analysis which stresses continuity and immobility is likely to be of limited value to them, particularly when they are dealing with modern nations such as Australia and the United States. The most important agencies of change, moreover, have been at work in both countries — industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, the rise of the mass media and so on. Perhaps the spirit of the American frontiersman and the Australian digger live on in some attenuated form, but one feels that if a time machine were to transport either the digger or the frontiersman to Sydney or New York they would feel equally lost in both places.

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