Lecture 3: The American Political Tradition
February 12, 2013
1. American Exceptionalism and the Liberal Tradition

2. The Multiple Traditions in America
Outline

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2. The Multiple Traditions in America
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)
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.
“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)
“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
Outline

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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
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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