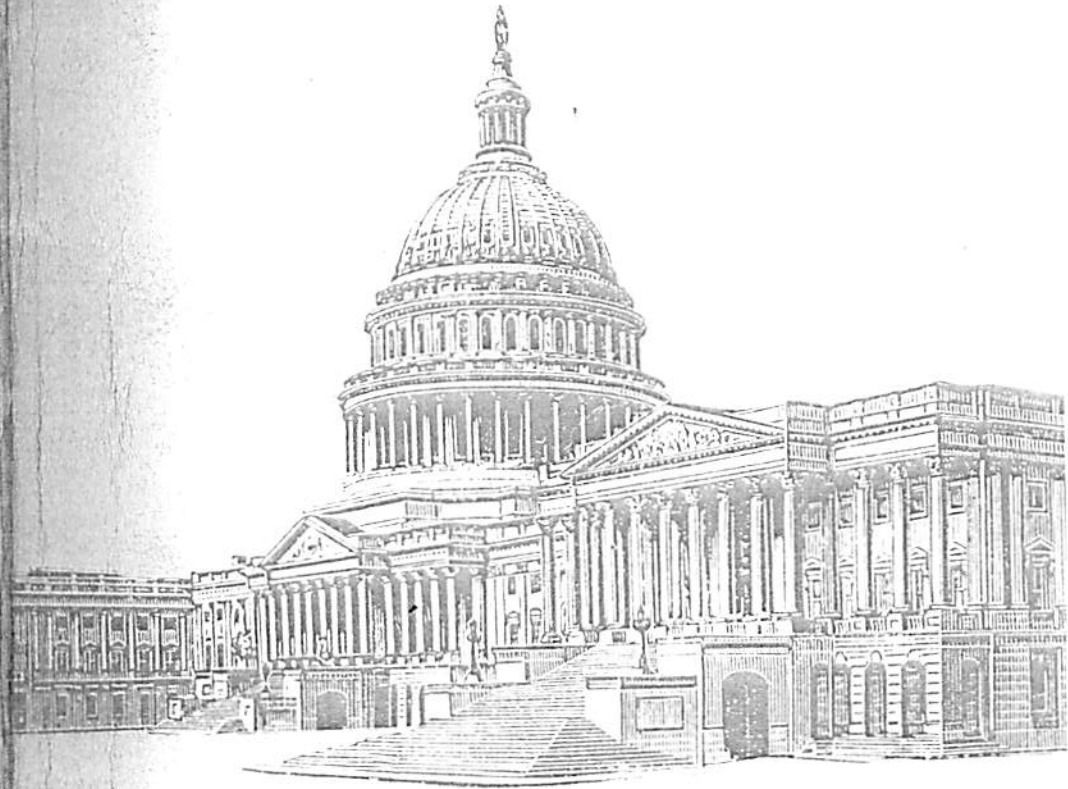


Cover by SUB ALLEN

BOORSTIN

The Genius of American Politics



The Genius of American Politics

How much of our political tradition can be absorbed and used by other peoples? Daniel Boorstin's answer to this question has been chosen by the Carnegie Corporation of New York for representation in *American Panorama* as one of the 350 books, old and new, most descriptive of life in the United States. He describes the uniqueness of American thought and explains, after a close look at the American past, why we have not produced and are not likely to produce grand political theories or successful propaganda. He also suggests what our attitudes must be toward ourselves and other countries if we are to preserve our institutions and help others to improve theirs.

"... a fresh and, on the whole, valid interpretation of American political life."—REINHOLD NIEBUHR, New Leader.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN is Preston and Sterling Morton Professor of American history at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* and editor of *An American Primer* and the series, *The Chicago History of American Civilization*.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

"... a profound and imaginative inquiry into the essence of the American political tradition."
—Karl W. Deutsch, *American Historical Review*.



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INTRODUCTION

THE genius of American democracy comes not from any special virtue of the American people but from the unprecedented opportunities of this continent and from a peculiar and unrepeatable combination of historical circumstances. These circumstances have given our institutions their character and their virtues. The very same facts which explain these virtues, explain also our inability to make a philosophy of them. They explain our lack of interest in political theory, and why we are doomed to failure in any attempt to sum up our way of life in slogans and dogmas. They explain, therefore, why we have nothing in the line of a theory that can be exported to other peoples of the world.

The thesis of this book is that nothing could be more un-American than to urge other countries to imitate America. We should not ask them to adopt our "philosophy" because we have no philosophy which can be exported. My argument is simple. It is based on forgotten commonplaces of American history—facts so obvious that we no longer see them. I argue, in a word, that American democracy is unique. It possesses a "genius" all its own. By this I mean what the Romans might have described as the tutelary spirit assigned to our nation at its birth and presiding over its destiny. Or what we more prosaically might call a characteristic disposition of our culture. In one sense, of course, everybody has a political the-

I

"Pompey then penetrated into the Sanctuary, in order to satisfy his curiosity as to the nature of the Judaean worship, about which the most contradictory reports prevailed. The Roman general was not a little astonished at finding within the sacred recesses of the Holy of Holies, neither an ass's head nor, indeed, images of any sort."

GRAETZ, *History of the Jews*, II, 66.

"When the temple was occupied by successive conquerors, Pompey the Great and . . . Titus Caesar, they found there nothing of the kind, but the purest type of religion, the secrets of which we may not reveal to aliens."

JOSEPHUS *Against Apion* ii. 82.

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ory, even if it is expressed only in hostility to theories. But this is a barren paradox, concealing more than it discovers. In our political life we have been like Molière's M. Jourdain, who was astonished to discover that all his life he had been speaking prose. We have not been much interested in the grammar of politics. We have been more interested in the way it works than in the theory behind it. Our unique history has thus offered us those benefits which come (in Edmund Burke's words) "from considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance" and has led us away from "extravagant and presumptuous speculations."

The great political theorists—men like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—even when not guilty of "extravagant and presumptuous speculations," have been primarily interested in discovering and systematizing general truths about society, regardless of time and place. However much they may have differed in other matters, they have all had in common an attempt to *abstract*, to separate the universal principles of all societies and governments from the peculiar circumstances of their own society and government. Much of what we understand comes from the light which they have thrown, from their different vantage points, on the problem of government. The United States has never produced a political philosopher of their stature or a systematic theoretical work to rank with theirs.

But I mean something more when in this book I speak of our antipathy to political theory. Especially in our own age (and at least since the French Revolution of

Introduction

1789), more and more of the world has sought in social theory no mere rationale for institutions but a blueprint for remaking society. Rousseau and Marx, for example, have been put to this use. Recent European politics shows us men of all complexions seeking an explicit orthodoxy for society. Burke was one of the first to note this tendency and its dangers, when he observed, "The bulk of mankind on their part are not excessively curious concerning any theories, whilst they are really happy; and one sure symptom of an ill-conducted state is the propensity of the people to resort to them." A pretty good rule-of-thumb for us in the United States is that our national well-being is in inverse proportion to the sharpness and extent of the theoretical differences between our political parties.

The tendency to abstract the principles of political life may sharpen issues for the political philosopher. It becomes idolatry when it provides statesmen or a people with a blueprint for their society. The characteristic tyrannies of our age—naziism, fascism, and communism—have expressed precisely this idolatry. They justify their outrages because their "philosophies" require them.

One of the many good fortunes of American civilization has been the happy coincidence of circumstances which has led us away from such idolatry. It is my belief that the circumstances which have stunted our interest in political philosophy have also nourished our refusal to make our society into the graven image of any man's political philosophy. In other ages this refusal might have

pragmatic -
truth = use
Anti-Theory
Anti-orthodoxy

Universal vs.
Peculiar
Circumstances

lack of
difference
in fact
good-feel

history -
anti-orthodoxy

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seemed less significant; in ours it is a hallmark of a decent, free, and God-fearing society.

If what I say is true, it has profound consequences both for our understanding of ourselves and for our relation to Europe. It speaks to those who say that what we need in this country is a clearer "philosophy" of democracy. It speaks to those who think we should try to compete with the Russians in a war of philosophies. This book adds up to a warning that, if we rely on the "philosophy of American democracy" as a weapon in the world-wide struggle, we are relying on a weapon which may prove a dud. It may prove so because, as I shall try to show in this book, the peculiar strengths of American life have saved us from the European preoccupation with political dogmas and have left us inept and uninterested in political theory.

Anyone who has recently been abroad and heard the sort of thing we are telling the world can say that it does not sound very good. The portraits of American life are sometimes admirable—of the public library, the general store, and the volunteer fire department. But the statements of what America believes (and therefore what Europe would be better by believing) make the American abroad uncomfortable, if not downright embarrassed. They say something which is not American at all, even if they are sometimes expressed with the engaging brashness of a Fourth of July oration. What is the matter with these general statements is not any weakness in our institutions or any special stupidity in our publicity writers. Actually, they are bad because of the peculiarities—and

Introduction

even the advantages—of our geography, our history, and our way of life.

To understand the uniqueness of American history is to begin to understand why no adequate theory of our political life can be written. It will also help us to see why our institutions cannot be transplanted to other parts of the world. In the present world struggle, therefore, we should not hope to convert peoples to an American theory of government or expect to save western Europe from communism by transplanting American institutions. I want to develop this thesis not by discussing the rest of the world but by underlining a few facts of American history.

Although I shall set out from some of the most familiar facts of our past, in the course of this argument I shall lead you to some unfamiliar—and even paradoxical—conclusions about our political life. To understand these conclusions, you will need to reject some of the most widely accepted clichés about us. These clichés have been manufactured by our European friends and enemies. They go back to propaganda about us several centuries old, the labels made by the age of George III and earlier, which have stuck with amazing effectiveness.

From the earliest days, romantic Europeans have touted America as the country of novelty, of the unexpected and the untried, of grand visions and aspirations, where man could try out his latest inventions and test all those vagaries which were impossible in a conservative Europe. At the same time, conservative Europeans have attacked us for these very same dispositions, which to them, of course, have seemed vices. For many decades we were

American
Democracy

1) Unique

2) Anti-
orthodox

American
Unique

the Utopia of radicals and the Babel of conservatives. We have been given a reputation for being a country without tradition, without wholesome continuity in institutions, where *anything* might happen. This is what Europeans have agreed on, and their unanimity has forced our not always grudging assent. Now it is my thesis that, whatever may have been our weaknesses, this is not one of them.

I shall try to show how American history has nourished in a very special way and to an extraordinary degree our feeling for that principle of social science which I shall later call the "seamlessness" of culture. It is enough for the present to say that all this denies the stock European picture of us. Our geography and history have led us to an unspoken assumption, an axiom, so basic to our thinking that we have hardly been aware of it at all. This is the axiom that institutions are not and should not be the grand creations of men toward large ends and out-spoken values; rather they are organisms which grow out of the soil in which they are rooted and out of the tradition from which they have sprung. Our history has fitted us, even against our will, to understand the meaning of conservatism. We have become the exemplars of the continuity of history and of the fruits which come from cultivating institutions suited to a time and place, in continuity with the past.

This point, if it is true, has special importance today. For the first time in modern history, and to an extent not true even in the age of the French Revolution, Europe has become the noisy champion of man's power to make over his culture at will. Communism is, in one sense, the

TRADITION

CONTINUITY
+
Anti-
Colossal
Image

extravagances of the French Revolution rewritten on the Gargantuan scale and acting with the terrifying efficiency of the twentieth century. People all over Europe have been accustomed, since the eighteenth century, to the notion that man can better his condition by trying to remake his institutions in some colossal image. Fascism and naziism proposed this; and so does communism. Europe has not yet realized that the remedy it seeks is itself a disease.

In this book I shall be describing some of those peculiarities of our history which in the past have helped save us from the romantic illusion. We cannot properly understand them without defining clearly our own picture of our political character. In my first chapter I will describe some of the most general characteristics of American political thought. Chapters ii, iii, and iv will deal, in turn, with three great crises: the Puritan struggle against the wilderness, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. In each case I shall try to discover the effect of the event on our traditional attitude toward political theory, at the same time seeing how each crisis illustrates characteristics which run through all our history. Then, in chapter v, I shall turn to the special relation between religion and political thought in the United States and the peculiar significance of our talkativeness about our ideals. In my last chapter I shall try to draw together the threads, to see what, if anything, can be generalized about our political theory. Is there perhaps a theory behind our theory, or behind our lack of a theory, which might itself have some validity as a conscious principle of political thought?

Ch
1 - character
of Am. Pol.
Thought
2-3-4 -
CRISIS
-PURITANS
-REVOLUTION
-CIVIL WAR
5 Religion
Ideal +
Am. Pol. Theo
6 -
Theory +
Principles

instead of
Philosophy
GIVENNESS

"Givenness" is the belief that values in America are in some way or other automatically defined: given by certain facts of geography or history peculiar to us. The notion, as I shall outline it in the present chapter, has three faces, which I shall describe in turn. First is the notion that we have received our values as a gift from the past; that the earliest settlers or Founding Fathers equipped our nation at its birth with a perfect and complete political theory, adequate to all our future needs.

The second is the notion that in America we receive values as a gift from the present, that our theory is always implicit in our institutions. This is the idea that the "American Way of Life" harbors an "American Way of Thought" which can do us for a political theory, even if we never make it explicit or never are in a position to confront ourselves with it. It is the notion that to Americans political theory never appears in its nakedness but always clothed in the peculiar American experience. We like to think that, from the shape of the living experience, we can guess what lies underneath and that such a guess is good enough—perhaps actually better than any naked theory. While according to the first axiom of "givenness" our values are the gift of our history, according to the second they are the gift of our landscape.

The third part of "givenness" is a belief which links these two axioms. It is a belief in the continuity or homogeneity of our history. It is the quality of our experience which makes us see our national past as an uninterrupted continuum of similar events, so that our past merges indistinguishably into our present. This sense of continuity

HOW BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF AN AMERICAN THEORY HAS MADE A THEORY SUPERFLUOUS

I

THE American must go outside his country and hear the voice of America to realize that his is one of the most spectacularly lopsided cultures in all history. The marvelous success and vitality of our institutions is equaled by the amazing poverty and inarticulateness of our theorizing about politics. No nation has ever believed more firmly that its political life was based on a perfect theory. And yet no nation has ever been less interested in political philosophy or produced less in the way of theory. If we can explain this paradox, we shall have a key to much that is characteristic—and much that is good—in our institutions.

In this chapter I shall attempt an explanation. I start from the notion that the two sides of the paradox explain each other. The very same facts which account for our belief that we actually possess a theory also explain why we have had little interest in political theories and have never bothered seriously to develop them.

For the belief that an explicit political theory is superfluous precisely because we already somehow possess a satisfactory equivalent, I propose the name "givenness."

Paradox
Successful institutions
not philosophy

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ity is what makes it easy for us to accept the two first axioms at the same time: the idea of a preformed original theory given to us by the Founding Fathers; and the idea of an implicit theory always offered us by our present experience. Our feeling of continuity in our history makes it easy for us to see the Founding Fathers as our contemporaries. It induces us to draw heavily on the materials of our history, but always in a distinctly nonhistorical frame of mind.

I. VALUES GIVEN BY THE PAST: THE PREFORMATION IDEAL

Now I shall begin by trying to explain what I have called the first axiom of "givenness": the idea that values are a gift from our past. Here we face our conscious attitude toward our past and toward our way of inheriting from it. This particular aspect of the "givenness" idea may be likened to the obsolete biological notion of "preformation." That is the idea that all parts of an organism pre-exist in perfect miniature in the seed. Biologists used to believe that if you could look at the seed of an apple under a strong enough microscope you would see in it a minute apple tree. Similarly, we seem still to believe that if we could understand the ideas of the earliest settlers—the Pilgrim Fathers or Founding Fathers—we would find in them no mere seventeenth- or eighteenth-century philosophy of government but the perfect embryo of the theory by which we now live. We believe, then, that the mature political ideals of the nation existed clearly conceived in the minds of our patriarchs. The notion is es-

Why a Theory Seems Needless

entially static. It assumes that the values and theory of the nation were given once and for all in the very beginning.

What circumstances of American history have made such a view possible? The first is the obvious fact that, unlike western European countries, where the coming of the first white man is shrouded in prehistoric mist, civilization in the United States stems from people who came to the American continent at a definite period in recent history. For American political thought this fact has had the greatest significance. We have not found it necessary to invent an Aeneas, for we have had our William Bradford and John Winthrop, or, looking to a later period, our Benjamin Franklin and James Madison. We have needed no Virgil to make a myth of the first settlement of our land or the first founding of the Republic; the crude facts of history have been good enough.

The facts of our history have thus made it easy for us to assume that our national life, as distinguished from that of the European peoples who trace their identity to a remote era, has had a clear purpose. Life in America—appropriately called "The American Experiment"—has again and again been described as the test or the proof of values supposed to have been clearly in the minds of the Founders. While, as we shall see, the temper of much of our thought has been antihistorical, it is nevertheless true that we have leaned heavily on history to clarify our image of ourselves. Perhaps never before, except conceivably in the modern state of Israel, has a nation so firmly believed that it was founded on a full-blown-the-

a full theory of the beginning

the test of values

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ory and hence that it might understand itself by recapitulating a particular period in its past.

This idea is actually so familiar, so deeply imbedded in our thinking, that we have never quite recognized it as a characteristic, much less a peculiarity, of our political thought. Nor have we become aware of its implications. "Four score and seven years ago," Lincoln said at Gettysburg in 1863, "our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

America: the born w. theory
We have forgotten that these words are less the statement of a political theory than an affirmation that an adequate theory already existed at the first epoch of national life. As we shall see in a later chapter, this belief itself helps account for the way in which the traditional, conservative, and inarticulate elements of our Revolution have been forgotten. A few slogans have been eagerly grasped as if they gave the essence of our history. While the conservative and legal aspect of our Revolution has remained hidden from popular view, schoolboys and popular orators (who seldom read beyond the preambles of legal documents) have conceived the Declaration of Independence as written primarily, if not exclusively, to vindicate man's equality and his "inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Our determination to believe in a single logically complete theory as our heritage from the earliest settlers has thus actually kept us from grasping the facts of the early life of our nation. Strenuous efforts have been made to homogenize all the fathers of our country. A great deal

Why a Theory Seems Needless

of the popular misunderstanding of the New England Puritans, for example, can be traced to this desire. Tradition teaches us to treat the history of our nation from 1620 to 1789 as a series of labor pains, varying only in intensity. The Puritans, we are taught, came here for religious and political liberty; and the American Revolutionaries are supposed to have shown a pilgrim-like fervor and clarity of purpose.

If we compare our point of view with that of the historically conscious peoples of Europe, we shall begin to see some of its implications. The Europeans have, of course, had their interludes of nostalgia for some mythical heroic age, some Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung*. Musolini sought to reincarnate the Roman Empire, Hitler to revive some prehistoric "Aryan" community. But such efforts in Europe have been spasmodic. Europeans have not with any continuity attributed to their nameless "earliest settlers" the mature ideals of their national life. In contrast, we have been consistently primitivistic. The brevity of our history has made this way of thinking easy. Yet that is not the whole story. We find it peculiarly congenial to claim possession of a perfect set of political ideas, especially when they have magical elusiveness and flexibility. Their mere existence seems to relieve us of an unwelcome task.

Our firm belief in a perfectly preformed theory helps us understand many things about ourselves. In particular, it helps us see how it has been that, while we in the United States have been unfruitful in political theories, we have at the same time possessed an overweening sense

ORTHODOXY ¹³ + Reverence to Past

↳ witch-hunts

tend to see *homogeneity* of *American history*

European look it is for

created implicit
Orthodoxy
(PERFORMATIC)

The Genius of American Politics

of orthodoxy. The poverty of later theorizing has encouraged appeal to what we like to believe went before. In building an orthodoxy from sparse materials, of necessity we have left the penumbra of heresy vague. The inarticulate character of American political theory has thus actually facilitated heresy-hunts and tended to make them indiscriminate. The heresy-hunts which come at periods of national fear—the Alien and Sedition Acts of the age of the French Revolution, the Palmer raids of the age of the Russian Revolution, and similar activities of more recent times—are directed not so much against acts of espionage as against acts of irreverence toward that orthodox American creed, believed to have been born with the nation itself.

Among the factors which have induced us to presuppose an orthodoxy, to construct what I have called a “preformation” theory, none has been more important than the heterogeneous character of our population. Our immigrants, who have often been the outcasts, the déclassés, and the persecuted of their native countries, are understandably anxious to become part of a new national life. Hence they are eager to believe that they can find here a simplicity of theory lacking in the countries from which they came. Immigrants, often stupidly blamed for breeding “subversive” or “un-American” ideas, have as much as any other group frenetically sought a “pure” American doctrine. Where else has there been such a naïve sense of political orthodoxy? Who would think of using the word “un-Italian” or “un-French” as we use the word “un-American”?

GIVENNESS

Factors for orthodoxy

① heterogeneous population

(strong naturalism of melting pot)

strongest socialization

Success of Past ⇒ Givenness

Why a Theory Seems Needless

The fact that we have had a written constitution, and even our special way of interpreting it, has contributed to the “preformation” notion. Changes in our policy or our institutions are read back into the ideas, and sometimes into the very words, of the Founding Fathers. Everybody knows that this had made of our federal Constitution an “unwritten” document. What is more significant is the way in which we have justified the adaptation of the document to current needs by attributing clarity, comprehensiveness, and a kind of mystical foresight to the social theory of the founders. In Great Britain, where there is an “unwritten” constitution in a very different sense, constitutional theory has taken for granted the gradual formulation of a theory of society. No sensible Briton would say that his history is the unfolding of the truths implicit in Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights. Such documents are seen as only single steps in a continuing process of definition.

The difference is expressed in the attitudes of the highest courts in the two countries. In Great Britain the highest court of appeal, the House of Lords, has gradually come to the conclusion that it must be governed by its own earlier decisions. When the House of Lords decides a point of the constitution, it is thus frankly developing the constitution, and it must follow the line which it has previously taken, until the legislature marks out another. Not so in the United States. Our Supreme Court considers itself free to overrule its earlier decisions, to discover, that is, that the constitution which it is interpret-

② written Constitution

interpretation = clarity of original

PAPER

American Conservatism — change interpretation of Constitution + insist it always meant X
The Genius of American Politics

ing really has all along had a different meaning from what had been supposed.

The American view is actually closer to the British view during the Middle Ages, when the very idea of legislation was in its infancy and when each generation believed that it could do little more than increase its knowledge of the customs which already existed. In the United States, therefore, we see the strange fact that the more flexible we have made our constitution, the more rigid and unexperimental we have made our political theory. We are haunted by a fear that capricious changes in theory might imperil our institutions. This is our kind of conservatism.

Our theory of society is thus conceived as a kind of exoskeleton, like the shell of the lobster. We think of ourselves as growing *into* our skeleton, filling it out with the experience and resources of recent ages. But we always suppose that the outlines were rigidly drawn in the beginning. Our mission, then, is simply to demonstrate the truth—or rather the workability—of the original theory. This belief in a perfect original doctrine, one of the main qualities of which is practicality, may help us understand that unique combination of empiricism and idealism which has characterized American political life.

If we turn from our constitution to our political parties, we observe the same point of view. The authority of a particular past generation implies the impotence of later generations to reconstruct the theoretical bases of our national life. Today it is still taken for granted that the proper arena of controversy was marked off once

Why a Theory Seems Needless

and for all in the late eighteenth century: we are either Jeffersonians or Hamiltonians.

In no other country has the hagiography of politics been more important. The lives of our national saints have remained vivid and contemporary for us. In no other country—except perhaps in Soviet Russia, where people are called Marxists, Leninists, or Trotskyites—do statesmen so intimately embrace the image of early national heroes. Would an Englishman call himself a Walpolean or a Pittite? Yet in the United States the very names of our political parties—Republican and Democratic—are borrowed from the early age of our national life. This remarkable persistence of early labels offers the sharpest contrast to what we see in continental western Europe. There new parties—and new party labels—come and go with the seasons, and most of the parties, with double- or triple-barreled names, draw on the novel vocabulary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a commonplace that no fundamental theoretical difference separates our American political parties. What need has either party for an explicit political theory when both must be spokesmen of the *original* American doctrine on which the nation was founded?

Political theory has been little studied in the United States. For example, departments of political science in many of our universities show more interest in almost anything else than in political theory. This, too, can be explained in part by the limitations imposed by the “preformation” point of view. If our nation in the beginning was actually founded on an adequate and sufficiently ex-

tie to original founders

not change just reinterpretation

IDEALS + EMPIRICISM

③ Political Parties Jeff. or Hamilton

Result

① education history

Result

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Why a Theory Seems Needless

U.S. theory for explicit theory revealed at one time, later theorists can have only the minor task of exegesis, of explaining the sacred texts. Constitutional history can, and in many ways has, become a substitute for political theory.

The unique role which our national past has played in constructing our image of ourselves and our standards for American life has made us hypersensitive about our own history. Because we have searched it for the substance of a political philosophy, we have been inclined to exaggerate its contemporary relevance. When Charles A. Beard in his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* in 1913 showed that members of the Constitutional Convention had a financial interest in the establishment of a stable federal government, he scandalized respectable scholars. Leaders of opinion, like Nicholas Murray Butler, thought the book a wholesale attack on the American creed. The explosive import of such a book would have been impossible, had not the facts of political history already been elevated into an axiom of political philosophy. Any innuendo against the motives of the Founding Fathers was therefore seen as an implied attack on the American way of life. The British have never been so disturbed by the suggestion that the barons had a personal interest in extracting from King John the concessions written into Magna Charta.

During the 1930's, when the Communist party made a serious effort to appear a native American growth (using the slogan "Communism Is Twentieth-Century Americanism"), it too sought to reinterpret the American past. It argued that the American Revolution had really been

Powerful defense against Revisionist History

a class war and not merely a colonial rebellion. The radical attack on the doctrine of judicial review, which then seemed to obstruct change in our institutions, was made by way of a labored two-volume historical treatise, Louis Boudin's *Government by Judiciary*. He sought to prove that the Founding Fathers had never intended the Supreme Court to have the power to declare federal laws unconstitutional.

The lives of our great men have played a peculiarly large role in our attempt at self-definition. Some of our best historical talent has in recent years gone into biography: Beveridge's *Marshall*, Van Doren's *Franklin*, Malone's *Jefferson*, and Freeman's *Washington*. We have also the long filial tradition of Sparks's or Weems's or Marshall's *Washington* or Wirt's *Patrick Henry*. Such works are a kind of hybrid between what the lives of the saints or of the Church Fathers are for Catholics and what the lives of gods and goddesses were for the ancient Greeks. For us, biographies have taken on a special importance, precisely because we have had so little dogmatic writing. And our national history thus has a primary significance for Americans which is without parallel in modern nations. The quest for the meaning of our political life has been carried on through historical rather than philosophical channels.

It is not surprising, then, that much of our self-criticism has taken the form of historical reinterpretation. In periods of disillusionment we have expressed ourselves not so much in new philosophies, in dogmas of dictatorship or existentialism, as in earnest, if sometimes tor-

History of Biography
Political Life
found in History not Philosophy

tured, reinterpretations of the American past. In the 1920's and 1930's, for example, people who would not have looked twice at a revolutionary political theory or a nihilist metaphysic eagerly read W. E. Woodward's *New American History*, James Truslow Adams' *Founding of New England*, Edgar Lee Masters' *Lincoln*, or the numerous other iconoclastic works about Washington or Grant. The sharpest criticisms of contemporary America were the works of Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken, which were hardly theoretical.

The mystic rigidity of our "preformation" theory has been consistent with great flexibility in dealing with practical problems. Confident that the wisdom of the Founding Fathers somehow made provision for all future emergencies, we have not felt bound to limit our experiments to those which we could justify with theories in advance. In the last century or so, whenever the citizens of continental western Europe have found themselves in desperate circumstances, they have had to choose among political parties, each of which was committed to a particular theoretical foundation for its whole program—"monarchist," "liberal," "catholic," "socialist," "fascist," or "communist." This has not been the case in the United States. Not even during the Civil War: historians still argue over what, if any, political theory Lincoln represented. In the crisis which followed the great depression, when Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his program for saving the American economy, he did not promise to implement a theory. Rather, he declared frankly that he would try one thing after another and would keep trying

until a cure was found. "The country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another." Neither he nor his listeners doubted that whatever solution, within the limits of common-law liberties, might prove successful would also prove to have been within the prevision of the Founding Fathers. The people balked only when a proposal—like the Court-packing plan—seemed to imperil the independence of the judiciary, an ancient principle of the common law.

On second thought, it is not surprising that we who have been most sure of the basic structure of our political life should also have been most prodigal of legislation. Two remarkable and complementary facts are that the few amendments to our federal Constitution have been so few (only twelve in addition to the first ten amendments, or ^{many legal} bill of rights) during the last century and a half, and that at the same time our legal experiments have been so numerous. For us it is enough to recommend a piece of legislation if a considerable number of people want it, if there is no loud opposition, and if there seems a reasonable chance that it might reduce some present evil. Our laws have been abundant and ephemeral as the flies of summer. Conservatism about our basic institutions, and the faith that they will be vindicated in the national experience, have made us less fearful of minor legislation.

Our mystic belief in the "preformed" national theory has thus restrained theoretical vagaries without preventing particular experiments. Without having ever intended it, we have thus stumbled on an evolutionary approach to institutions. Yet at the same time we have taken up a

(Present) every program discuss but point flexible individuals to come

few amendments + legal experiments

legislation more experiment because it doesn't change "GIVENS"

theory

kind of social Freudianism; for the "preformation" concept of values implies belief that the childhood years of a nation's history are crucial for the formation of its character. More than that, we have given the national past a peculiarly normative significance. Small wonder that we should seem complacent, if we judge ourselves by whether we are true to our own character. Our American past and the theories of politics which it is thought to imply, have become the yardstick against which national life is measured. This is the deeper meaning of the criterion of "Americanism" which is so familiar in the United States and sounds so strange to European ears.

Past is our yardstick

II. VALUES GIVEN BY THE LANDSCAPE: THE LAND OF THE FREE

The notion of "givenness," as I have explained, has three aspects which I shall discuss in this chapter. The first which I have been dealing with until now was the axiom that our values were the gift of our past, and actually of a particular period in the past. The second, to which I shall now turn, is that our values and our theory are the gift of the present: not of any particular men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but of the peculiarly fortunate conditions of life in America.

(2) Theory from conditions

The first axiom is the one which I have just described and called by the name of the "preformation" ideal. It is the notion that, in the beginning and once and for all, the Founding Fathers of the nation gave us a political theory, a scheme of values, and a philosophy of government. As we have seen, it is an ideal, a static kind of "givenness"—a gift of orthodoxy, the gift of the past.

The second axiom is similar, in that it, too, is an excuse or a reason for not philosophizing. It is the notion that a scheme of values is given, not by traditions, theories, books, and institutions, but by present experience. It is the notion that our theory of life is embodied in our way of life and need not be separated from it, that our values are given by our condition. If this second part of the idea of "givenness" seems, in strict logic, contradictory to the first, from the point of view of the individual believer it is actually complementary. For, while the first axiom is ideal and static in its emphasis, the second is practical and dynamic. "Preformation" means that the theory of community was given, once and for all, in the beginning; the second sense of "givenness" means that the theory of community is perpetually being given and ever anew.

all over the world for books etc

2 continuation of 1st

Taken together with the idea of preformation, this second "givenness" makes an amazingly comprehensive set of attitudes. The American is thus prepared to find in all experience—in his history and his geography, in his past and his present—proof for his conviction that he is equipped with a hierarchy of values, a political theory. Both axioms together encourage us to think that we need not invent a political theory because we already possess one. The idea of "givenness" as a whole is, then, both as idealistic as a prophet's vision and as hardheaded as common sense.

This second face of "givenness" is at once much simpler and much more vague than the concept of preformation. It is simply the notion that values are im-

Simple (1)

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placit in the American experience. The idea that the American landscape is a giver of values is, of course, old and familiar. It has long been believed that in America the community values would not have to be sought through books, traditions, the messianic vision of prophets, or the speculative schemes of philosophers but would somehow be the gift of the continent itself.

We Americans have always been much impressed by the simple fact that we are children of a Brave New World. Even from the earliest settlements, but especially since the formative era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we have looked upon ourselves as the lucky beneficiaries of an especially happy environment. In the pamphlets which Puritans wrote in the seventeenth century to attract their brethren to New England, we read fantastic tales of the abundance of crops and game, the magic of the air and water; how life on the new continent cured consumption, gout, and all sorts of fevers; how the old became young, the young became vigorous, and barren women suddenly bore children. In the very same pamphlet we can read how the wilderness would toughen the effete and how the wealth of this unexploited paradise would enrich the impoverished.

The myth was no less alive two centuries later, when Paul Bunyan, the giant woodsman of the forest frontier (as James Stevens describes him),

felt amazed beyond words that the simple fact of entering Real America and becoming a Real American could make him feel so exalted, so pure, so noble, so good. And an indomitable conquering spirit had come to him also. He now felt that he could

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whip his weight in wildcats, that he could pull the clouds out of the sky, or chew up stones, or tell the whole world anything.

"Since becoming a Real American," roared Paul Bunyan, "I can look any man straight in the eye and tell him to go to hell! If I could meet a man of my own size, I'd prove this instantly. We may find such a man and celebrate our naturalization in a Real American manner. We shall see. Yay, Babe!"

Then the two great Real Americans leaped over the Border. Freedom and Inspiration and Uplift were in the very air of this country, and Babe and Paul Bunyan got more noble feelings in every breath [Paul Bunyan (New York, 1948), pp. 27 f.].

We have been told again and again, with the metaphorical precision of poetry, that the United States is the *land* of the free. Independence, equality, and liberty, we like to believe, are breathed in with our very air. No nation has been readier to identify its values with the peculiar conditions of its landscape: we believe in *American equality, American liberty, American democracy, or, in sum, the American way of life.*

Our belief in the mystical power of our land has in this roundabout way nourished an empirical point of view; and a naturalistic approach to values has thus, in the United States, been bound up with patriotism itself. What the Europeans have seen as the gift of the past, Americans have seen as the gift of the present. What the European thinks he must learn from books, museums, and churches, from his culture and its monuments, the American thinks he can get from contemporary life, from seizing peculiarly American opportunities.

It is surely no accident that the most influential, if not the only significant, general interpretation of our history has been that of Frederick Jackson Turner. He found the special virtues of our institutions and of our national

Factors for
Environment-Theory
① Environment
might
opportunity
(Turner)
+
rugged
individualism

The Genius of American Politics

character in the uniquely recurrent conditions of our frontier. Turner translated Paul Bunyan into the language of sociology:

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions.... All peoples show development.... But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon.... This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character [pp. 2 f.].

fluidity + expansion
↓
forms Am. Character's virtues

The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier [The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920), p. 37].

These words—indeed, much of the work of Turner and his followers—are actually a theory to justify the absence of an American political theory.

How can we explain the origin, growth, and vitality of this idea of "givenness" in America? The most obvious and some of the most important explanations have escaped us for their very obviousness; to become aware of them it may be necessary to go to Europe, where some of us begin to discover America.

One fact which becomes increasingly difficult to com-

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communicate to the urban American, but which the automobile and our national parks have kept alive for some of us, is the remarkable grandeur of the American continent. Even for the early Puritan settlers the forest which hid savage arrows had a fascination. The magic of the land is a leitmotif throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We hear it, for example, in Jefferson's ecstatic description of the confluence of the Potomac and the Shenandoah rivers; in Lewis and Clark's account of the far west; in the vivid pages of Francis Parkman's Oregon Trail; and in a thousand other places. It is echoed in the numberless travel-books and diaries of those men and women who left the comfortable and dingy metropolises of the Atlantic seaboard to explore the Rocky Mountains, the prairies, or the deserts. Their simple emotions should not be underestimated, nor should we interpret them with too much subtlety. It is misleading to associate too closely the appeal of virgin America with the bookish romanticism of European belles-lettres. The unspoiled grandeur of America helped men believe that here the Giver of values spoke to man more directly—in the language of experience rather than in that of books or monuments.

Our immigrant character has been an incentive toward this point of view. The United States has, of course, been peopled at widely distant times and for the most diverse reasons. Some came because they were Protestants, others because they were Catholics, still others because they were Jews; some because they were monarchists, others because they were opposed to monarchy. We have been

③ Diversity against Philosophy has
So made diverse a philosophy

② not spoiled
selecting American notes

Why didn't they bring philosophers with them

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too well aware of this diversity to try to seek our common values in our original cultures. It is true, as I shall explain in my fifth chapter, that we have developed a kind of generalized Christianity, which is probably what we mean by the "In God We Trust" on our coins. We have looked anxiously for some common faith. A few writers, like Louis Adamic, have even tried to make the motley itself a scheme of values: to make the patchwork seem the pattern. But the readiest solution, a necessary solution, perhaps the only possible solution for us, has been to assume, in the immigrant's own phrase, that ours is a "golden land," that values spring from our common ground. If American ideals are not in books or in the blood but in the air, then they are readily acquired; actually, it is almost impossible for an immigrant to avoid acquiring them. He is not required to learn a philosophy so much as to rid his lungs of the air of Europe.

The very commonness of American values has seemed their proof: they have come directly from the hand of God and from the soil of the continent. This attitude helps explain why the martyr (at least the *secular* martyr) has not been attractive to us. In the accurate words of our popular song, "The Best Things in Life Are Free." Men in America have had to struggle against nature, against wild Indians, high mountains, arid deserts, against space itself. But these struggles have seemed required to make the continent livable or comfortable, not to make our society good. In Europe, on the other hand, the liberal could not make the plant of liberty grow without first cutting out the weeds of tyranny; and he took that

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for his task. But the American has preened himself on his good sense in making *his* home where liberty is the natural growth. Voltaire declared, "Where liberty is not, there is my home." This was a fitting and thoroughly un-American reply to Franklin's "Where liberty dwells, there is my country."

The character of our national heroes bears witness to our belief in "givenness," our preference for the man who seizes his God-given opportunities over him who pursues a great private vision. Perhaps never before has there been such a thorough identification of normality and virtue. A "red-blooded" American must be a virtuous American; and nearly all our national heroes have been red-blooded, outdoor types who might have made the varsity team. Our ideal is at the opposite pole from that of a German Superman or an irredentist agitator in his garret. We admire not the monstrous but the normal, not the herald of a new age but the embodiment of his own. In the language of John Dewey, he is the well-adjusted man; in the language of Arthur Miller's Salesman, Willy Loman, he is the man who is not merely liked but *well-liked*. Our national heroes have not been erratic geniuses like Michelangelo or Cromwell or Napoleon but rather men like Washington and Jackson and Lincoln, who possessed the commonplace virtues to an extraordinary degree.

III. THE CONTINUITY OF AMERICAN HISTORY

The third part of the idea of "givenness," as I have said, is actually a kind of link between the two axioms

④
Struggles
of low
scale -
conditions
flexible +
goals not
excessive

Cultural VIRTUES - WIDESPREAD

Americans
appreciate
Elite
within the
Mass
not
Elite apart
(outside) the
Mass
— democratic
impulse

which I have already described: the notion that we have an ideal given in a particular period in the past (what I have called the idea of "preformation") and the idea that the theory of American life is always being given anew in the present, that values are implicit in the American experience. The third aspect to which I now turn helps us understand how we can at once appeal to the past and yet be fervently unhistorical in our approach to it.

By this I mean the remarkable continuity or homogeneity of American history. To grasp it, we must at the outset discard a European cliché about us, namely, that ours is a land without continuity or tradition, while in Europe man feels close to his ancestors. The truth of the matter is that anyone who goes to Europe nowadays cannot fail to be impressed with the amazing, the unique, continuity of American history and, in sharp contrast, the discontinuity of European history.

This is true in several senses. In the first place, there is the obvious fact that the recent history of Europe has seen violent oscillations of regime. Each new regime has tried to deny their democratic past, the democrats trying to deny their fascist past, etc. But there is a subtler way in which the landscape and monuments which surround the European tend to impress on him the various possibilities of life in his place, while what the American sees confirms his sense of "givenness," his belief in the normality, if not the inevitability, of the particular institutions which he has evolved. "For the American tour-

③ Continuity of Am. History Little + low level Conflict

Factors for continuity

④ Lack of violence in common political past.

ist," Aldous Huxley has shrewdly observed, "the greatest charm of foreign travel is the very high ratio of European history to European geography. Conversely, for the European, who has come to feel the oppressive weight of a doubtless splendid, but often fatal past, the greatest charm of travel in the New World is the high ratio of its geography to its history."

Let me explain. I have recently been abroad, where I spent the better part of a year in Italy. My impressions there sharpened that contrast which I have been describing between the American and the European image of the past. The first church I visited was the Capella Palatina in Palermo, where Christian mosaics of the twelfth century are surmounted by a ceiling of Moslem craftsmanship. Throughout Sicily one comes upon pagan temples on the foundations of which rose churches, in the Middle Ages transformed into mosques, later again to be used as Christian chapels.

The capitals of Europe are rich in evidence of the unpredictability of human history. Of all cities in the world, Rome is perhaps richest in such evidence: the retaining walls which early Romans built to protect the road up the Palatine are made of fragments stolen from Greek and North African temples; columns standing in the Forum bear witness not only to ancient Roman skill but also to the shattered schemes of the conquered peoples from whom they were taken. The fate which the Romans brought upon their predecessors was later, of course, visited upon Rome herself by the barbarians and Christians, who made the Forum into their stone-quarry. The

Huxley's Gustabo

Europe is a history book

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Colosseum, where Christians and Jews were once slaughtered to amuse the mob, is now divided by partitions which later Christians erected to support the stage of their Passion Play. Its walls are pocked by holes from which barbarian and Christian soldiers extracted iron for their weapons in the Middle Ages; large segments were removed by popes to add splendor to their churches. The magnificent roads which Julius Caesar built for his legions are traveled by little automobiles which, with appropriate irony, borrow their name from "Mickey Mouse"—in Italian, "Topolino."

In Europe one need not be an archeologist or a philosopher to see that over the centuries many different kinds of life are possible in the same place and for the same people. Who can decide which, if any of these, is "normal" for Italy? It is hardly surprising, then, that the people of Europe have not found it easy to believe that their values are given by their landscape. They look to ideology to help them choose among alternatives.

In the United States, of course, we see no Colosseum, no Capella Palatina, no ancient roads. The effect of this simple fact on our aesthetic sense, though much talked of, is probably less significant than on our sense of history and our approach to values. We see very few monuments to the uncertainties, the motley possibilities, of history or, for that matter, to the rise and fall of grand theories of society. Our main public buildings were erected for much the same purpose for which they are now being used. The Congress of the United States is still housed in the first building expressly constructed for that purpose. Al-

European landscape not people very re-espousing ideology

fact

(2) Institutions continuous (just is provided)

Why a Theory Seems Needless

though the White House, like the Capitol, was gutted by fire during the War of 1812, it, too, was soon rebuilt on the same spot and to a similar design; in 1952 another restoration was completed. Our rural landscape, with a few scattered exceptions—the decayed plantation mansions of the South, the manor houses of upstate New York, and the missions of Florida and California—teaches us very little of the fortunes of history. Even our archeology is republican, designed to make the past contemporary; you can spend a vacation at Colonial Williamsburg.

The impression which the American has as he looks about him is one of the inevitability of the particular institutions, the particular kind of society in which he lives. The kind of acceptance of institutions as proper to their time and place which tyrants have labored in vain to produce has in the United States been the result of the accidents of history. The limitations of our history have perhaps confined our philosophical imagination; but they have at the same time confirmed our sense of the continuity of our past and made the definitions of philosophers seem less urgent. We Americans are reared with a feeling for the unity of our history and an unprecedented belief in the normality of our kind of life to our place on earth.

We have just been observing that our history has had a continuity: that is, that the same political institutions have persisted throughout our whole national career and therefore have acquired a certain appearance of normality and inevitableness. No less important is the converse of this

history continues
theory continues

American process
seems inevitable

③
America
"born free"

fact, namely, that our history has *not* been *discontinuous*, has not been punctuated by the kind of internal struggles which have marked the history of most of the countries of western Europe, and which have fed their awareness that society is shaped by men. Two apparent exceptions to this observation are the American Revolution and the Civil War, with which I shall deal in later chapters. The important fact is what De Tocqueville observed a century ago, namely, that America somehow has reaped the fruits of the long democratic revolution in Europe "without having had the revolution itself." This was but another way of saying that the prize for which Europeans would have to shed blood would seem the free native birthright of Americans.

CULTURAL
UNITY
FROM
④ ⑤ ⑥

During these last one hundred and seventy-five years the history of the United States has thus had a unity and coherence unknown in Europe. Many factors—our geographical isolation, our special opportunities for expansion and exploitation within our own borders, and our remoteness from Europe—have, of course, contributed. Even our American Civil War, which shook us deeply and was one of the bloodiest wars anywhere in the century, can be understood with scant reference to the ideologies then sweeping Europe: to the intellectual background of 1848, of the Risorgimento, of the Paris Commune. It was not properly a counterpart of European struggles of the period, nor really an exception to the domestic continuity of our history.

But, whatever the causes, the winds of dogma and the gusts of revolution which during the last century and a

half have blown violently over western Europe, making France, Italy, Germany, and now perhaps even England testing grounds for panaceas, have not ruffled our intellectual climate. The United States, with a kind of obstinate provincialism, has enjoyed relatively calm weather. While European politics became a kaleidoscope, political life in the United States has seemed to remain a window through which we can look at the life envisaged by our patriarchs. The hills and valleys of European history in the nineteenth century have had no real counterpart in the history of the United States. Because our road has been relatively smooth, we have easily believed that we have trod no historical road at all. We seem the direct beneficiaries of our climate, our soil, and our mineral wealth.

American history quite smooth