

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

I believe that a great historian, Louis Hartz, and an outstanding book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, were caricatured in your June 1987 issue in the article, "A Round Table: Synthesis in American History." The article follows up one of a year earlier in which Thomas Bender spoke of a branch of intellectual history "associated with the American Studies movement in the early Cold War years" when "new historians . . . began writing about the 'American mind' or, more precisely, the 'democratic thought' that was supposed to be at the core of American experience." A footnote cited Hartz' book as an example.

Well, yes, Hartz did write the book during the Cold War years, but it betrays no connection with the Cold War in tone or subject. A few pages at the end discuss US international involvement after World War II. That is as close a link as can be made. As for "democratic thought" at the core of the American experience—"liberal thought" is what Hartz says, which includes a democratic component, a rather different idea.

A year later when Nell Painter snapped at his heels for even mentioning Hartz, Bender pushed her away, pleading that he only cited him in a footnote and repeating his odd Cold War characterization.

Painter, meanwhile, railed against the "chauvinism . . . in such syntheses as *The Liberal Tradition in America* . . . which demonstrates the 'failure' of socialism along with the 'triumph' of liberalism in the United States." She added that after Vietnam, Watergate, Iran, and funding the Contras "hymns to virtuous American exceptionalism do not play quite so well." Worse than his "digs at socialists," however, is his "blindness to the lot of enslaved people" and to the delirious effects

of white supremacy. She scored him for "repeated generalizations about 'free society' and 'free air.'" His synthesis, she said, like others of the 1950s, was "no synthesis at all."

This is astonishing criticism. Surely one could disagree with Hartz' theories—Do you really need feudalism to have socialism? Has there never been a serious challenge to liberalism in the US? But to call his book a "hymn to American exceptionalism" and to say that he takes "digs" at socialists is amazing.

On one point I agree with Painter. Hartz' book is not a synthesis; it is a thesis. Its subject is very broad and very important, and the book very wide-ranging in the evidence it summons, which may lead some, erroneously, to think that it is an effort at synthesis. Furthermore, it is unabashedly a work of intellectual, not social or political, history. It is certainly not a comprehensive study of the American experience or a narration of the American past. Nor is it even a review of all American intellectual history; religion, for example, is scarcely touched upon.

The book argues, compellingly, I think, that, as Hartz used to say in his seminars, "America only has one political idea—liberalism." He would add, "I wish it had more, but it hasn't." Similarly, the book, far from being a hymn to anything, is generally critical, speaking of the "tyranny" of Locke in the US and of the "absolutism" of American liberalism—"Locke dominates American political thought, as no thinker anywhere dominates the political thought of a nation. He is a massive national cliché" (p. 140): "For stripped of the feudal ethos on the right and the socialist ethos on the left, and with Progressivism itself collaborating in the Alger movement, there was literally no escape in America from the frightful psychic impact of the bourgeois competition" (pp. 210-11). The

entire section in Chapter VIII, "The Theory of Success and Failure," demonstrates the harshness of Lockian, or liberal, absolutism and the psychological advantages of socialism. "Nor was socialism a bogey merely or a technique for challenging property; it too was a theory of status, rescuing the working class from the liberal sense of 'failure' and rationalizing its position in terms of a creed of cosmic optimism." (p. 219). Some dig!

Hartz clearly recognizes the racial issue in the US, pointing out, for example, that "racist theories of imperialism [were] not without [their] receptive base . . ." "Even the theory of racial supremacy, and this quite apart from Darwinism, found a twisted root in American life." Admittedly, he believed that "all this was basically alien to the national liberal spirit" (pp. 290-91). Surely one could argue with that last sentence, but one could also argue for it, even in these retrogressive days.

Phrases such as "free society" and "free air" are almost invariably placed in quotation marks, indicating that they are part of a theory or point of view being discussed and not necessarily the author's assessments. Speaking in his own persona, as on page 136, he talks of a "comparatively free society."

Hartz' chapter on "America and the World" is far from discredited by events abroad since he wrote, e.g., the war in Vietnam, the crises in Iran, the involvement with the Contras. Indeed, it clarifies them.

"It is the absence of the experience of social revolution which is at the heart of the whole American dilemma. Not only does this produce the quality of our absolute thinking, Locke never having been contrasted with Filmer and hence never with Marx, but in a whole series of specific ways it enters into our difficulty of communication with the rest of world. We find it hard to understand Europe's 'social question' and hence tend to interpret even the democratic socialisms of Europe in terms of our own antiradical fetishism. We are not familiar with the deeper social struggles of Asia and hence tend to interpret even reactionary regimes as 'democratic'" (p. 306). ". . . America must look to its contact with other nations to provide that spark of philosophy, that grain of

relative insight that its own history has denied it" (p. 287).

Enough said. Might I respectfully suggest a re-reading?

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To the Editor:

I am distressed by the failure, in Thomas Bender's articles on the "narrative/synthesis problem" in the *JAH* [June 1986] and elsewhere, and in the June 1987 Round Table discussion, to come to grips with the most important issue at stake. Roy Rosenzweig clarified matters greatly by suggesting the problem concerned the "consumption" of American history, implying our profession deals in "products" that should be prettied up and cunningly marketed. Nell Irvin Painter called for more women and minorities in the narrative. These are simple enough to supply. The down side involves the nastiness we all wish could be conjured away. Mr. Bender's "public cultures" are more sophisticated than Mr. Rosenzweig's "products" for consumption, but not, I fear, of a different species. The behavior of middle class women is a "culture" ideal for enjoyable contemplation. Unfortunately lynching is an equally important American "public culture," within the terms of Mr. Bender's definition. Giving each accurate recognition in a synthesized narrative in crude terms of numbers of paragraphs, illustrations, or even handy videotapes as Mr. Rosenzweig proposes, will take a marketing manager with aggressive ethics and a strong stomach.

I don't believe our lack of a comprehensive narrative is due to failed methodology or insufficient talent or even an absence of professional consensus about what occurred in the American past. The problem is one of the content of the narrative to be presented to the general public, and what repercussions a new synthesis will have on priorities among specialized fields and their professional practitioners.

Mr. Bender and the participants in the June Round Table have not confronted this difficult question of content directly. Charles and Mary