

# Introduction and Comments

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Running through most, though not all, of the articles in this issue of *Perspectives on Politics* is the theme of competing interpretations of the same event or activity—a subject all too familiar to those of us with partners, children, or political convictions. Some articles directly address alternative readings; in other cases, competing interpretations appear across articles or between author and commentator(s). There are also surprising substantive resonances among articles in this issue, especially about Louis Hartz's thesis of the liberal tradition in America.

Suzanne Rudolph, in her revised 2004 APSA presidential address, "The Imperialism of Categories," contrasts the methodology and underlying epistemology of comparative politics and area studies. The former she defines as the search for empirical regularities across political units such as states, often though not necessarily through behavioral studies or formal analysis. The latter is the search for distinctively important features of particular political units or regions. It is more concerned with interpretation of meaning than with causal explanation for outcomes. There are deep moral and political implications, Rudolph argues, in these choices of research design. Much work in comparative politics has involved a mission, intentional or not, of modernizing "backward" nations or ensuring that American values and outlooks are universally accepted. Area studies research, in contrast, seeks to express and ensure the dignity of local, particularized political knowledge, which contains a wisdom about which Western political scientists are often clueless. This exercise in interpretation concludes with a plea for more attention to interpretation.

The next two articles assert different, even contradictory, explanations for the same surprising political event. Thinkers from Aristotle through at least John Adams have worried that in a democracy the many poor would outvote the few rich, thereby legally confiscating their property. That has mostly not happened. In fact, a spectacular reversal of that prediction occurred recently in the United States, when Congress approved and President George W. Bush signed two major tax cuts that hugely and directly benefited the wealthiest Americans. Whether they will eventually help the rest of the population remains to be seen,

but Aristotle and Adams would have been astonished. So were Larry Bartels, and Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. In "Homer Gets a Tax Cut," Bartels seeks to explain the tax cut by showing that the public indeed supported it—even people who knew that income inequality would increase as a consequence and who thought that increased income inequality was a bad idea. He introduces the concept of "unenlightened self-interest" to explain this outcome, and takes us through a fascinating discussion of citizens' reasoning (or lack thereof). If Bartels is right, American democracy is working at least in a procedural sense; lawmakers were in accord with citizens' preferences in voting for upwardly redistributive tax cuts.

In "Abandoning the Middle," however, Hacker and Pierson reject the claim that the public endorsed this tax cut, mistakenly or not. Instead, they argue, citizens of the United States preferred many policies over a tax cut, and they were simply snookered, twice. Hacker and Pierson analyze an array of tricks that legislators and the president used to ensure passage of the bills, ranging from what they describe as outright lying about their long-term consequences to methods of ensuring that the extent of benefits and narrow range of beneficiaries were hidden. Even liberal Democrats went along, thus ensuring that in this case at least, Congress did not respond to the preferences of the median voter or legislator.

These two articles speak directly to each other and together provide a wonderful example of how political science deepens and enriches our understanding of important political events—as well as why political scientists will continue to squabble over just what those events really indicate.

Henry Hale, in "The Makeup and Breakup of Ethnofederal States," takes us out of the realm of competing interpretations and into the realm of competition over the very survival and configuration of states. He seeks to explain why some states with many distinctive ethnic groups survive (e.g., Russia), while others disintegrate under the pressure of dominant, "core" groups (e.g., the USSR). His answer is political—the design of a state, and in particular the location of its subnational boundaries in relationship to the location of its ethnic groups, makes all the difference. If a state can disperse the members of a dominant

ethnic group into many small subnational units with considerable autonomy, rather than allowing them to congregate in one or several large units, it stands a fighting chance of survival. Hale shows how this simple, elegant formulation explains the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise and survival (so far) of Russia better than other possible explanations do, and he suggests how its lessons might be applicable elsewhere.

Jonathan Isacoff takes us back to the realm of competing interpretations in "Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict." Even setting aside Arab explanations for the actions of Israel since the 1950s, Isacoff finds plenty of grounds for dispute over why the state of Israel has been bellicose when it might have been diplomatic. The older, Zionist historians see Israel as a fragile, deeply threatened polity surrounded by actual or potential enemies. It must show its strength and determination lest it risk another holocaust for its Jewish citizens. The new historians are also attuned to the ongoing threats to the state of Israel, but insist that Israel itself is partly at fault for the hostility it encounters. For domestic political reasons, in this view, militarists won out over diplomats in the 1950s and since then Israel has been blind to opportunities for compromise or has even fostered war itself. Isacoff obviously cares deeply about the fate of Israel and the Palestinians, but his central purpose in this article is to draw our attention to a philosophy of history rather than to a messy conflict. He argues that a pragmatic or pragmatist stance toward historical facts—which interpretation will help us to solve current political or analytic problems?—gives political science the best leverage for providing good answers to important questions, regardless of whether they are "true" answers.

Sari Nusseibeh, a philosopher appointed president in 1995 of al-Quds University, the Arab university of Jerusalem, refrains from disputing the real villain in Middle Eastern politics. Instead, in "A Formula for Narrative Selection," he engages with the virtues and defects of a pragmatist stance toward conflicting historical interpretations. Nusseibeh analyzes whether pragmatism can avoid the Scylla of meaningless relativism as well as the Charybdis of objectivism, the assertion that if some facts (and interpretations?) are true, others must necessarily be false. He concludes with a cautious endorsement of Isacoff's approach, while insisting that one must not "despair of a true account."

Phillip Abbott, in "Still Louis Hartz after All These Years," brings us back to the safer terrain of interpretive disputes in American political discourse. Hartz asserted in 1955 that the United States was, for better or worse, an entirely liberal state—and scholars of American political thought and practice have been debating the claim ever since. If the United States is entirely liberal, does that mean it is a unique "city on the hill," a beacon of light and reason to the rest of the world? Or does the liberal society thesis simply mean that Americans can never mount a

serious opposition to their own nation's evildoing in realms such as enslavement, international imperialism, or gratification of the rich at the expense of the poor? Most historians have sought simply to move beyond Hartz, to insist that the United States does in fact have a rich tradition of opposition to dominant liberalism or that it is no different from other nations in having a dominant but contested philosophy. Abbott revises these revisionists by arguing that Hartz is still just as relevant to analyzing American political thought and practice as he ever was. Using the difficult case study of the 1960s, Abbott argues that Hartz's concepts of liberal reform, the American democrat, liberal enlightenment, and Thermidor still explain what does, and does not, happen over the course of American political disputes.

Richard Iton, in "The Sound of Silence," and Sean Wilentz, in "Uses of *The Liberal Tradition*," take polite but firm exception to Abbott, and therefore to Hartz. Iton points out that we cannot understand the absence of an American left-wing party to contest the liberal consensus without more attention to the roles of racial difference and racism. Hartz's argument was notoriously weak when he discussed the antebellum American South, and Abbott, according to Iton, has still not taken into sufficient account the enormous impact of the American civil rights movement and reactions against it that sought to retain racial hierarchy. The historian, Wilentz, wants to relegate Hartz to the dustbin of history, and instead to engage Abbott himself on the 1960s and contemporary politics. In his view, the past was less simple than Abbott can illuminate with Hartz's categories, and the present may also be more complex; the old tropes insufficiently reveal "the depth of the political change that may now be at hand."

In February 2003, Garry Trudeau's *Dooniesbury* cartoon featured Michael's teen-aged daughter, who had been developing flash mobs for Howard Dean. If he loses in the primaries, she assured her father, his young supporters would support the Democratic candidate by "hook[ing] him up with a full linking meet-up, download blog and flash mob capability asap." Asked if the hapless candidate would understand any of that, she confessed, "Probably not. We're still explaining it to Dean." Dean may not have understood adolescent computer-speak, but he did use the Internet to change the nature of American political campaigning, according to Matthew Hindman in "The Real Lessons of Howard Dean." This "Perspectives" essay shows how Web-based politics galvanizes partisans unequally, may change the nature of seeking and attaining campaign contributions, and may introduce radically new forms of campaign activity. Dean lost, but his legacy to partisan politics may be much deeper than "the scream."

Luisa Angrisani shows us the recent history and inside workings of "Regional Markets in Latin America." Should nations south of the United States seek economic ties with their giant to the north, with each other instead, or in

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some complex network that includes but is not limited to the United States? Angrisani, an editor for the Economist Intelligence Unit, shows how this question, so crucial to Latin American economies, has been variously answered by different states at different times. She concludes by expressing her optimism that regional trade agreements will, finally, really take hold because they seem the best avenue to more trade, increased production, higher employment, and ultimately greater equality within Latin American nations. It is an ambitious goal for a policy choice that has been only fitfully successful, but one can only hope that she is right.

Finally, in a return to issues of competing interpretations of the same phenomenon Mark Graber, in "Constitutionalism and Political Science," uses the occasion of a syllabi review essay to castigate his fellow political scientists for not paying enough attention to their own discipline when they teach constitutional law. He points to exciting and illuminating books, articles, and research programs in the political analysis of law, and then to their absence in most syllabi about law in political science depart-

ments. Why do we choose to act like relatively inept constitutional lawyers rather than like expert and creative political scientists when we stand in front of undergraduate classes, he asks? Regardless of one's answer to that question, Graber's call for a more political and less legalistic interpretation of courts and judicial decisions will, we hope, stir some salutary controversy.

This issue of *Perspectives* has the usual complement of exciting and informative book reviews. Sholem Asch once pointed out that "writing is a lot easier if you have something to say." The continuing quantity of books deserving review and the quality of the reviews demonstrate that political scientists have a lot to say, to which all of us ought to attend.

The next issue of *Perspectives* will include articles on power and political institutions, on the uneasy alliance between feminist critics of marriage and proponents of gay marriage, and on a different way of seeking a stable state in a circumstance of ethnic division. As I write, it is the seventh day of Hanukkah; it will sound anachronistic when you read these words, but happy holidays, nonetheless!

Dear Colleagues:

We'd like your opinion! *Perspectives on Politics* has now published two full volumes of articles, commentaries, symposia, "Perspectives" essays, book and syllabi review essays, and book reviews. Time has come for some critical assessment from our readers. As we look ahead to future issues, we want to know where we've been the most (and least) successful in meeting our goal of being "engaging, illuminating, provocative, and broad-based."

Has the quality met your expectations? Are the articles too short, or too long? Sufficiently or overly "academic"? Provocative? How do you use the journal? What kinds of contributions would you like to see that we don't currently publish?

Your perspective matters! To submit comments anonymously, use the form posted on our Web site (<http://apsa-pop.gov.harvard.edu/>) by April 30.

Cordially,  
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