

**17.037/17.038. American Political Thought**  
**Spring 2004**

**Reading Questions for Week 2. Interpreting American Political Thought**

**Louis Hartz**

Hartz accepts Tocqueville's claim that Americans are "born equal"—America lacks a feudal tradition. Hartz goes on to characterize American society as having "an absolute and irrational attachment" to liberalism (6). What does he mean by this? What are the implications of America's "natural liberalism"? What are the dangers?

Given his assumption about a liberal consensus in American society, how then does Hartz explain internal conflicts which have characterized American political life?

**Michael Sandel**

According to Sandel, what is America's "public philosophy"? What is the central idea of this public philosophy? What, in Sandel's view, is wrong with this idea? What public philosophy does he defend instead? How is this alternative tradition different from the one he critiques?

Sandel provides an account of how the "procedural republic" (with its emphasis on individual rights as trumps and neutrality) emerged in American constitutional law and in American political discourse. What are the important episodes in American history through which this occurred?

**Rogers Smith**

Smith contests Hartz's claim that America's political culture is pervasively liberal. He argues that American politics is best viewed as the result of the interactions of multiple political traditions. What are the alternative traditions that have shaped American political discourse?

How does accepting this "multiple traditions" view of America affect how we understand contemporary politics, if at all? On this view, what are the sources of change in American politics?