

## “Freedom is Everybody’s Job”

### Cold War Realism and American Stories of Peoplehood

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... in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. For when we have faced down impossible odds; when we've been told that we're not ready, or that we shouldn't try, or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people.

*Yes we can.*

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation.

*Yes we can.*

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights.

*Yes we can.*

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness.

*Yes we can.*

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land.

*Yes we can* to justice and equality. *Yes we can* to opportunity and prosperity. *Yes we can* heal this nation. *Yes we can* repair this world. *Yes we can.*

Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Left-leaning viewers in Europe had two overwhelming responses to the concession speech following the New Hampshire primary in January of 2008 that paradoxically set Senator Obama's candidacy alight. The first was undeniable excitement, intensified still further when Will I. Am set the speech to music. Here, seemed a candidate capable of reaching soaring new heights of inspiration, someone offering a radical break with the past, not only possessed with an ability to take on a widely disliked and distrusted Republican party but imbued with the soaring confidence necessary to transform the politics of the United States. But the second response was confusion. For this was an African-American candidate whose politics appeared to offer a new direction in American politics and whose slogan promised real "change", and yet who nonetheless continued to imbed his whole appeal in a story of American *continuity*: in the maintenance of a particular narrative -- "the unlikely story that is America." It was, moreover, a candidate who chose to align himself not only with the radical aspects of that tradition -- with abolitionists and suffragists -- but also with its more orthodox components: with founding documents (even though they had permitted the maintenance of slavery,) and with pioneers who pushed across a continent, (even though they had dispossessed indigenous peoples as they did so.)

This European disorientation is rooted, of course, in a sharply contrasting set of political cultures. Few aspiring European leaders, especially of the left, have ever made such explicit reference to their nation's past or to its projected destiny when advancing their own political cause, at least since the end of the Second World War. To do so would be all but an impossibility in the formerly fascist countries, like Germany and Austria, an oddity in nations which remain constitutional monarchies, such as the United Kingdom, and even very difficult in revolutionary republics like France where the heritage of 1789, of Bonaparte and the various monarchical restorations has always remained hotly contested.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, though, reference to what Rogers Smith has called these "stories of peoplehood" has long been a constant of political life, even at moments of apparently far-reaching change.<sup>3</sup> Declarations of essential continuity between the nation's past and its future, between the ideals of its Founders and of its successors, were heard not only in Obama's soaring rhetoric, then, but in Teddy Roosevelt's call for a

“Square Deal” in the progressive era, Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech at the end of the New Deal, Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream at the Lincoln Memorial during civil rights, and John F. Kennedy’s demand for a “New Frontier.” Indeed, there is not a single successful major political transformation that has not been very publicly and very forcefully associated with the shared “American story.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this ubiquity, the role of such stories of peoplehood has provoked wide and intense debate amongst those who normatively reflect on American politics. There are some, most notably Samuel Huntington, Rogers Smith, Richard Rorty, and Michael Sandel, who have written strongly in praise of this story-telling tendency, arguing that it, and it alone, provides the United States with a “sense of national community adequate to its purpose.”<sup>5</sup> There are many others, though, including Bonnie Honig, James Tully, Melissa Williams, Bernard Yack, and Iris Marion Young, who have been far more uneasy. What is the chance of genuine political change in the United States, these critics ask, if political platforms have always to be justified with reference back to some mythic shared heritage? What chance too, for passionate loyalties to groups other than the nation, to ethnic, cultural, or local allegiances which might require different justificatory narratives, those which might even stand at odds with those of the established national story?<sup>6</sup> The critics have grown even more vocal of late as calls for a more global, cosmopolitan politics have gathered force. How effectively can the politics of climate change be incorporated into the standard American story, they ask? How could the case for redistribution between the nations of the global north and the south be thus made?<sup>7</sup>

Intriguingly, this is not the only time that there has been an intense debate on the place of stories of peoplehood in American politics. Such a debate has emerged before, most notably in the years immediately after the Second World War, just as the United States emerged from conflict and Depression to face a new threat in the form of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. This period is now frequently remembered as the golden era of such stories: the era before the culture wars of the 1960s when *Superman* campaigned for the American dream in comic-books for children, the Advertising Council for America led nationwide campaigns outlining the merits of the American life, and, as we shall see, President Harry S. Truman sent a “Freedom Train” touring the entire country with the story of America captured in original documents, flags, dioramas, and evoking

mass festivities as it went.<sup>8</sup> But this was almost a moment of great skepticism. It was a period when critics feared that an almost hysterical attachment to narratives of the past was preventing them from responding to the new and fearsome challenges of the present, and when a dogmatic dedication to values inherited from the Founding was generating a dangerous degree of ideological inflexibility, even threatening to engender an authoritarian politics of exclusion, as captured most dramatically in the struggle against McCarthyism.<sup>9</sup>

The early Cold War debates that emerged from this disagreement over the merits or otherwise of the place of stories of peoplehood in American life generated some of the great texts of twentieth century political theory, including Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Reinhold Niebuhr's, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center*.<sup>10</sup> These debates also infused major works of American literature, including Ralph Emerson's mesmeric *Invisible Man*, and cultural criticism such as Richard Lewis's *American Adam*.<sup>11</sup> But despite this, the nuances of the arguments, their strengths and their weaknesses, have been all but forgotten by political theorists and political scientists today, meaning that we can learn little, if anything, from this vital pre-cursor to contemporary contests.

In this paper I aim to bring these early Cold War arguments back to the fore. I want to remind us of the cases that were made in favor and against the peculiarly strong role that stories of peoplehood play in American politics and to evaluate those cases. I also wish to see whether we can learn from those arguments today as we try to mediate the debates between the advocates of a politics grounded on stories of peoplehood and the critics.

I will do this by focusing primarily on two positions in that debate. The first, which I associate with Louis Hartz, was the most critical of the role of the stories and wished to see them transcended, even removed from political life. The second, associated with a loose ideological group known as the early Cold War realists, was far less critical, believing that stories of peoplehood had a beneficial place in American politics so long as they were of a particular sort. My goal here is to analyze both of these accounts thoroughly, explicating and evaluating them as I go. But in order to get fully to grips with the terms of their dispute, we need to start with an example of what they were arguing

about. I begin, that is, by introducing one early Cold War story of peoplehood in action: Harry S. Truman's Freedom Train.

### **1. Early Cold War Stories of Peoplehood: The Freedom Train**

In September of 1947, President Harry Truman travelled from Washington to Philadelphia to set the "Freedom Train" on its way around the country. The Train was packed full of historical documents -- including the Declaration of Independence, George Washington's copy of the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights -- and was part of a Presidential mission to "re-sell America to the Americans."<sup>12</sup> It was met by near frantic scenes wherever it went. In the words of *The New York Times*, people "flocked" to the Freedom Train. "Everywhere," the *Times* continued, the Train's arrival was "a big day in town, a day for brass bands and patriotic speeches and visiting dignitaries. Schools dismiss. Merchants decorate their windows and the country people come in to see the 'Spirit of 1776' with its cargo of 'genuine American history.'"<sup>13</sup> Around four million people made it on to the Freedom Train in the nine months it toured the country, but many more participated in the events that surrounded it. In Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, 100,000 citizens lined-up to enter the Train, even though only 8,416 were able to get on. Those who were disappointed were at least able to take part in the accompanying "Rededication Week," where they recited "Freedom Promises," "Freedom Pledges," and even "Freedom Prayers," before going on to a "Freedom Fashion Show." The National Archives estimate that fifty million Americans attended some element of the Train's festivities.<sup>14</sup>

There was never any doubt as to the central ideal that lay behind the Freedom Train. It was given away in the name. But its origins are intriguing nonetheless. The Train itself was the dream-child of United States Attorney General Tom Clark in the immediate aftermath of the War and was first known as the "Liberty Train."<sup>15</sup> Clark proposed the idea to President Truman, arguing that as the United States emerged from one hot war and entered a cold one, it would time to remind American citizens of the glory of the history of a "free society" and to encourage them to reaffirm their dedication to the political and legal structures and the "steely virtues" required to maintain such a society over time. America needs a "civic reawakening," Clark insisted. The plan he and

Truman eventually settled on would see the great historic documents of American liberty sent around the country for people to see, with each village, town or city in which the Train stopped encouraged to organize a local celebration of American political structures and to organize rituals allowing local people to reconfirm their dedication to the American story and to the civic virtues necessary for freedom.<sup>16</sup>

Within a month of Clark proposing the basic idea to Truman, the American Heritage Foundation had been founded to oversee the plan, drawing in support from the private sector, especially from the Advertising Council of America, which had helped with propaganda during the War, led by Thomas D'Arcy Brophy. Working closely with archivists and historians in the National Archives, the Heritage Foundation selected some 130 original and copied documents and flags, organized for a new locomotive and a set of carriages, and drew-up a nationwide itinerary. They also commissioned Irving Berlin to write a song to be performed by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters to wish the collection on its way and to welcome it in cities and towns across the nation: "Inside the Freedom Train," Berlin's chorus ran, "you'll find a precious freight, those words of liberty, the documents that made us great!"<sup>17</sup>

In addition to this organization work, the Advertising Council and the Heritage Foundation were also pressed into slightly incongruous historical and philosophical service. Without much input from professional academics, advertising executive Leo Burnett (the creator of "Marlboro Man") produced a lengthy pamphlet, entitled *The Good Citizen*, reminding every American citizen of the national purpose through a series of telling short stories, pious poetry, and noble sayings along the lines made popular in the Depression years by *Reader's Digest*.<sup>18</sup> The Foundation also prepared the "Freedom Pledge" which each visitor to the Train was instructed to recite as they boarded, the "Freedom Prayer" for them to offer in church on Sunday, and "Nine Promises of the Good Citizen" to which they were asked continually to commit themselves. The "Promises" were widely distributed and displayed, including in the lobbies of public buildings and the foyers of theaters. They ran as follows:

Ask yourself,

"Am I truly a citizen – or just a fortunate tenant of this great nation?"

Here is a summary of the working tools of good citizenship. Pledge yourself here and now to these nine points – that you, your children and your children’s children may continue to enjoy the American heritage of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

1. I will vote at all elections. I will inform myself on candidates and issues and will use my greatest influence to see that honest and capable officials are elected. I will accept public office when I can serve my community or my country thereby.
2. I will serve on a jury when asked.
3. I will respect and obey the laws. I will assist public officials in preventing crime and the courts in giving evidence.
4. I will pay my taxes understandingly (if not cheerfully).
5. I will work for peace but dutifully accept my responsibilities in time of war and will respect the flag.
6. In thought, expression and action, at home, at school and in all my contacts, I will avoid any group prejudice, based on class, race, or religion.
7. I will support our system of free public education by doing everything I can to improve the schools in my own community.
8. I will try to make my community a better place in which to live.
9. I will practice and teach the principles of good citizenship right in my own home.<sup>19</sup>

The Promises, Pledge, and Prayer all ended with the motto of the Train: “freedom is everybody’s job,” the invocation of the world of work presumably intended to leave the Train’s visitors in no doubt that freedom in the United States was a serious business, in part protected by the social legacy of the past and by the inherited institutions of American governance but also needing a weary citizenry to rededicate itself to the fundamental ideals and the virtues believed essential to its protection and its maintenance across time.

## 2. Against Liberal Dogmatism: The Hartzian Critique

The Freedom Train was the most spectacular of a series of efforts in the early Cold War years to tell the story of America in a politically-engaged way. It was joined, though, by an enormous range of similarly extraordinary, if smaller-scale campaigns. At the same time, the Advertising Council ran a series of national billboards advancing the prosperity-inducing benefits of the “American Way;” Harding College of Arkansas produced a popular cartoon series widely shown before mainstream movies, which promised a “complete understanding of the institutions, values, and ideas of liberty and democracy that made our country great;” and the U.S. Office of Education’s organized an annual “Voice of Democracy” competition, where school children from across the country were invited to write essays entitled “I speak for democracy,” with state and regional rounds leading to four children being selected to compete against each other in a national final held at Williamsburg and broadcast nationwide on radio.<sup>20</sup> All of these efforts shared a great deal in common. They were all identifiably *liberal* -- with a continual emphasis on freedom, on rights, on tolerance, and open-mindedness, even in controversial areas such as racial affairs. And they were also unarguably *patriotic*, with an equally extensive emphasis placed on the exceptional status of the United States among nations and on the duties that citizens of the United States must fulfil in order to maintain their republic and its freedoms over time.

Despite their ubiquity and their undeniable public popularity, these stories of peoplehood were far from universally accepted by more philosophically-sophisticated commentators in the United States at this time. The most powerful of all condemnations came from what would now be considered the most likely source: from Louis Hartz whose *The Liberal Tradition in America* was published just seven years after the Freedom Train had ended its journey. In that book and a series of scintillating supporting articles, Hartz presented a searing critique of the place of this kind of story of peoplehood in shaping the course of American political history. He argued that the American obsession with telling this kind of story both formally in large-scale events, such as the Freedom Train, and informally, as in political campaigns, small-town newspapers and

even everyday conversation was responsible for many of the political failings as the United States. It was responsible, in particular, for encouraging Americans to turn their back on the unparalleled creativity and imagination of the New Deal, and to return to the more familiar laissez faire politics of the early Depression years.

Hartz's critique of liberal stories of peoplehood in the United States had two components and it is vital to understand both of them. *First*, he insisted that the politics of the United States was characterized by an obsessive, dogmatic, and inflexible dedication to what he called the "storybook" version of "Lockean liberalism." Ever since the Founding, he charged, the elites and the citizens of the United States have been almost uniformly dedicated to "atomistic social freedom" -- a doctrine that involves a commitment to individualist ethics, widespread hostility to the power of established authority, a pervasive scepticism toward social elites, and an intense sense of political equality. As a result Americans of all political persuasions have had to defend all of their favoured policy positions in those terms.

The result of this, Hartz believed, was a form of "liberal conformity" that posed a grave threat to creativity and innovation within American political life, with its almost "hysterical" emphasis on the core values of American liberalism leading to the "binding down" of any potential dissenter until she was unwilling, even unable, to challenge established norms, even if it would have been politically useful to do so.<sup>21</sup> The only exception to this rule was the New Deal years when the severity of the crisis combined with the rhetorical prowess of Roosevelt had wrested Americans from their ideological slumber and allowed them to experiment with real political alternatives. Otherwise, Americans were in the grip of a fascination with the liberal tradition and were incapable of seeing the value of political "eccentrics" or oppositionists, choosing instead always to narrow the range of political commitments that were thought "decent" or permissible and invoking a vast array of formal and informal social sanctions, stretching from discouragement to effective ostracism, against anyone who dared to disagree.<sup>22</sup> "Determined to pound loyalty home," he insisted, Americans who embrace their liberalism dogmatically have forgotten that "dangerous thoughts are an inevitable part of ... a free society" and that "when they do not occur to anyone ... that society will have ended, and the need for sedition will indeed be great."<sup>23</sup>

It was not only the hold of liberalism *per se* which troubled Hartz, though. For, *second*, he also insisted that the fact that American stories of peoplehood revealed that the elites and citizens of the United States were also unhealthy obsessed with the nation's own past, liberal or otherwise. The United States, he explained, had never experienced a revolutionary break from feudalism in the way that Europe had. As such, it had never witnessed the overthrow of one domestic political system and its replacement with an alternative. This, in turn, had led to Americans possessing an astonishing reverence for their own past in the mistaken assumption that it was this continuity that was responsible for the relative prosperity and international success of the republic. Such a view resulted, Hartz suggested, in an inability to understand the political future in terms of the discontinuity that was needed for real change. The United States was simply politically incapable of appreciating what other nations understood as the occasional necessity of dramatic political transformation, ensuring that America was destined always to look backwards to the period of the Founding even at periods of intense political introspection rather than forwards to a new polity grounded in an alternative political ideal.<sup>24</sup>

Combining these two critiques, Hartz saw American exercises in stories of peoplehood like the Freedom Train as little but milder instantiations of the dogmatic, inflexible, backward-looking liberalism that emerged in the early 1950s as the Cold War which included the "Red Scares" of McCarthy and his colleagues. This was all part of what Hartz called the politics of "liberal conformity." And there is no doubt that there was something in his view. The Freedom Train, for example, exhibited many of the characteristics that Hartz identified and condemned. A form of impassioned and even slightly paranoid liberalism was reflected in all of the Heritage Foundation's publications, especially in *The Good Citizen* and its "Freedom Pledge" and "Freedom Promises." It was also heavily present in public justifications for the project. The Freedom Train is "intended to combat lawlessness, subversive tendencies and lethargy," Tom Clark told Congress employing language that would have chilled Hartz's heart.<sup>25</sup> There was also a heavy degree of nostalgia underpinning the Train, running from the selection of the documents that the Train carried to the name of the locomotive that pulled it: "the Spirit of 1776." In an editorial in defence of the Train indeed, *The New York Times* brought these themes together exactly as Hartz would have feared. "Reading in its original

parchment the words, 'These truths we hold to be self-evident,' or the preamble of the Constitution," the *Times* suggested, "many Americans will ... feel a closer relationship to the past, will see behind the words the men who wrote them, will realize that there is such a thing as the 'American tradition' and the 'American way of life,' and will take a new vow to be worthy of these things."<sup>26</sup>

Powerful and influential though the Hartzian argument undeniably was, there was nonetheless something both too simplistic and too extravagantly critical in its dismissal of the early Cold War stories of peoplehood. The tellers of these stories -- the organizers of events such as the Freedom Train -- did not, after all, see themselves as reinforcing already widely shared dogmas. They thought, instead, that they were saving an imperilled tradition. American citizens, they believed, had become deeply insecure in their allegiance to a standardized Lockean liberalism during the War. Feelings of alienation, loss, and confusion engendered both by the conflict and the Depression had rendered Americans easy prey to rival political identities and especially to those which offered more dramatic certainties in politics, religion, or other aspects of social life, such as communism and variants of religious extremism.<sup>27</sup> America's identity as an identifiably liberal order could not to be taken for granted, they thus insisted. Rather, it would have to be fought for. As one noted contemporary commentator put it, "the death pallor will come over free society" unless these versions of the American story "can recharge the deepest sources of its moral energy."<sup>28</sup>

The historian Wendy Wall is right, then, when she suggests that those such as the organizers of the Freedom Train saw their mission as *instilling* (or possibly *re-instilling*) rather than simply reinforcing liberal mores.<sup>29</sup> Some of these story-tellers even openly described themselves as taking on "the task of liberal guardianship."<sup>30</sup> This by itself, of course, does not prove Hartz wrong. He would have explained all of these anxieties as just another instance of American liberal paranoia, no different to the moral panics about immigrants from Southern Europe that had gripped mainstream opinion in the first decade of the twentieth century or the fears of Communists, gamblers, feminists, and alcoholics that irrationally shaped public debate in the years immediately after the First World War. But, whatever his response, this realization does nonetheless take us to the

core understandings of Hartz's most powerful intellectual rivals, an otherwise inchoate group of political thinkers that I call the early Cold War realists, and to whom I now turn.

### **3. Dangers of Conflict and the Need for Commonality: The Realist Response**

The early Cold War realists -- whose work was captured in array of otherwise dissimilar texts as Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Arthur Schlesinger's *Vital Center*, Stuart Chase's *Roads to Agreement*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* -- all began their reflections on American politics with a single assumption. The United States, they charged, was not primarily characterized by a stable liberal consensus, as Hartz believed, but by a deep and dangerous set of domestic disputes, including racial division, class conflict, and tensions between the several States and the federal government. American politics, Niebuhr thus explained, faced a grave "internal peril" from such conflicts.<sup>31</sup> Such conflicts, they continued, had their roots in the peculiar history of the United States, prompted especially by the absence of a sense of ethnic unity that characterized most European nations and by popular belief in individualism and capitalistic competition. But they had been horrifically intensified by the social and economic dislocations of the Depression and then further still by the sense of confusion, even moral desolation, that had been the inevitable result of the experience of total war against. "Beset by feelings of isolation because of the fluid, pluralistic turbulence of [our nation]," Ralph Ellison poetically put it, "we cling desperately to our own familiar fragment of the democratic rock, and from such fragments we confront our fellow Americans in the combat ... which is the drama of American social hierarchy."<sup>32</sup> The more prosaic result was that modern American politics was characterized by fierce internal rivalries. For Niebuhr, almost each and every citizen possessed "ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbor."<sup>33</sup>

If conflict was the present-danger of American politics for the realists then their first commitment was to discovering a means of containing those conflicts. It was simply unconscionable to ignore them, as they believed Hartzians did, or to presume that they could ever be fully overcome, as some naïve idealists in the past had aspired to. It was vital, then, to render these disputes peaceful and to ensure that they did not present the political process from working smoothly and sustainably. Compromise and conciliation

became the political commitments of realists. It was vital to prevent any one group from seeking to dominate others and to prevent the kind of excessive infighting that threatened to inflict irreparable damage on the political system itself, presenting the serious risk that the liberalism of the United States would fail in its competition with authoritarian rivals. Realist politics was thus to be premised on the assumption that “conflict must be kept within bounds, if freedom itself is to survive.”<sup>34</sup>

The realists were also clear, though, that the spirit of compromise would not come easy. All sorts of Americans -- working class and bourgeois, white and black, Southern and Northern, left and right -- would need to develop a “positive and continuing commitment” to moderate and loyal forms of political action, learning how to give-and-take, to recognize the merits of social stability, and to turn their back on excessive sectional certainties. The difficulty was to explain how such a spirit could be built. The beginning of the answer, the realists all felt, lay in the emotions. War and depression had revealed, they believed, that citizens choose how to act politically as much on the basis of irrational, or at least non-rational, impulse as self-interested calculation. Any vision that was to have a chance of success in moderating political conflicts, therefore, would have to have a “living emotional content.” It was citizen *feelings* that would lead to moderated citizen actions.

But it was not just any passion or emotion that was required. Rather, what was needed was an emotional sense of commonalities drawing together differing individuals and groups<sup>35</sup> It was only such a lived feeling of commonality, the realists insisted, that could lead erstwhile political opponents to moderate their aggression towards each other such that they learnt to restrain their conflictual urges and treat each other as respected rivals within whom they lived, rather than as enemies that they sought to eliminate. “Our democracy has to generate a living emotional content, rich enough to rally its members” together whatever their personal or social differences, Arthur Schlesinger thus argued.<sup>36</sup>

It was for this reason, then, that the sort of shared story of peoplehood propagated by the Freedom Train was celebrated as a possible solution to the nation’s political ills, rather than condemned as an exercise in excessive homogenization and political conservatism. “If democracy is to survive” in the United States, Niebuhr concluded, “it must find a more adequate cultural basis,” and that cultural basis would have to be the

kind of emotionally-rich and potentially widely-shared story encapsulated by events such as the Train.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say, however, that the realists were not also acutely aware of some of the dangers that were associated with this kind of project. Most crucially, they were insistent that these stories had to emerge at least partly from the lived-experience of the majority of the people themselves and should never be imposed by a distant state authority or enforced by any other agency without significant public support. A “coerced unity,” Niebuhr insisted, can only “produce sadistic cruelties.” That, indeed, was the “tremendously valuable lesson” to be taken from the study of Nazism. The war, after all, had engendered a deep pessimism about the state and related political agencies, believing that all “special elites” are constantly “exposed to the temptations of pride and power.” To leave state authorities in charge of shaping and advancing stories of peoplehood, or at least to do so uncontested, was to invite disaster.<sup>38</sup>

More important even than that, though, the emotional unity realists sought was intended to be “thin” -- not invested with too much in the way of controversial assumptions -- and open to continual reinterpretation and reinvention. These conditions were required both so that as many groups as possible would feel fairly treated by the story if it became influential and so that it did not stand in the way of political innovation. It was crucial, therefore, that no story of peoplehood which was widely propagated should be fixed, dogmatic, or unreasonably exclusive. As Schlesinger put it, “a sense of humility is indispensable ... The conservative must not identify a particular *status quo* with the survival of civilization; and the radical equally must recognize that his protests are likely to be as much the expressions of his own self-interest as they are of some infallible dogma about society.”<sup>39</sup> The realists hoped, therefore, that a complicated Americanism could be born at this moment. It was to be emotionally intense enough to bind together people who were otherwise hostile to each other, but also light of detail and flexible of interpretation. Social and political conflicts were inevitable in the United States (and they also performed important functions,) the realists insisted, but stories of American national identity could generate the shared sense of collective identity which could moderate those conflicts as they took place, stabilizing the republic and safeguarding it from enemies, both internal and external, as it did so.

The realists were not solely interested in prescription, though. Theirs was also intended to be a descriptive account. To their eyes, the early Cold War years were already witnessing the emergence of just such a complicated, almost ironic, American story in events like the Freedom Train. “As a nation, we exist in the communication of our principles, and we argue over their application and interpretation as over the rights of property or the exercise and sharing of authority,” Ralph Ellison described. And yet despite those arguments, the national story within which these principles were embedded was common and emotionally powerful enough. It was that story that collectively “influence[s] our expositions in the area of artistic form” and is constantly “involved in our search for a system ... capable of projecting our corporate, pluralistic identity.” It was these liberal stories of peoplehood, Ellison concluded far from Hartz’s skepticism, that enable American citizens to “interrogate” themselves “endlessly as to who and what we are,” and it is they that “demand that we keep the democratic faith.”<sup>40</sup>

#### **4. Evaluating Early Cold War Stories of Peoplehood**

These two very different interpretations of the place of stories of peoplehood in the early Cold War year were premised on two-mirror opposite accounts of the present danger in American politics in the mid-twentieth century: excessive consensus, on the one hand, and excessive conflict, on the other. Comparing and contrasting them is, therefore, extraordinarily different, as at base are two rival, but equally fundamental, axioms. Nonetheless, their arguments also depended on particular empirical judgements, especially concerning the impact of the early Cold War stories of peoplehood on political debate in the United States. As such, then, it remains possible for us critically to evaluate their arguments, to compare them against each other and against political experience, in the hope that by doing so we might learn something of value for our debates today.

The most straightforward of these evaluations is worrying for Hartzians and encouraging for realists. The impact of the widespread attempt to tell stories of peoplehood in the early Cold War years on the nature of public discussion in the United States was unarguably contrary to what a Hartzian would expect. Put bluntly, such attempts did not close down political debate, at least nowhere near as dramatically Hartz’s account suggests. Rather, they appear to have sparked an astonishingly lively

public discussion both about the nature of American political identity and the relationship of that identity to everyday politics.

The Freedom Train provides a perfect example. Even a cursory examination of newspaper, radio, and social movement discussions of the Train demonstrates that its journey enlivened political argument. It did not quash it. Indeed, there were so many groups who felt perfectly comfortable being deeply and very publicly sceptical of the Train that J. Edgar Hoover sent nine reports to Tom Clark worrying that its travels were invoking subversion across the land.<sup>41</sup> As usual, Hoover over-reacted. Nonetheless, there were trade unionists who dismissed the Train as an exercise in business-biased propaganda and condemned the absence of the Wagner Act from the collection of documents, civil rights activists who thought it did not go far enough in its dedication to racial justice, Republicans who believed it was all part of the Democratic election machine, and some States' rights activists who were worried by the very idea of a Train travelling through their territory carrying a cargo from Washington.

Crucially, though, this was not open conflict, of the sort the realists feared. Instead, those who contested the message of the Train chose to do so in its *own* terms rather than in the name of a rival ideological tradition or self-interest. The trouble with the Train was thus not said to be its equation of Americanism with some form of liberalism *per se*, let alone its attempt to tell kind of American story. Instead, it was criticized either for its failure to advance some aspects of that liberalism over others or for its inability to acknowledge that the reality that life in the United States often fell short up to key aspects of its professed ideals. The Train offered a common language within which political debate could be joined.

This was especially strikingly true of two movements who might well have been expected to have distanced themselves from the Train: the U.S. Communist Party and the nascent civil rights movement. The leadership of the former group apparently toyed with the idea of a boycott. Eventually, though, they decided that even they were “in favour of the Bill of Rights,” so they chose instead to encourage members to visit the Train as long as they were accompanied by a Party-appointed commentator. The commentator's role was to draw the visitor's attention to the invaluable role that working people had played in struggling for freedom and justice throughout American history.<sup>42</sup> The story of the

civil rights movements' relationship to the Train was similar. It found voice in Langston Hughes' much quoted poem, "Freedom Train," originally written for *The New Republic*, in which Hughes rejected neither the central liberal ideals of the Train nor the nostalgia with which it was imbued. Instead, he asked "Is this here freedom on the Freedom Train *really* freedom or [just] a show again?" Opening with a scathing critique of the injustices faced by African Americans in mid-century America, Hughes concluded on a more optimistic note. Americans, he suggested, should "let the Freedom Train come zooming down the track" but only so long as it is "gleaming in the sunlight for white *and* black."<sup>43</sup>

The resolute unwillingness of the Train's detractors to criticize either the liberal essentials that the Train represented or its nostalgic reconstruction of American history might be thought to lend some succour to Hartz's criticism. But on reflection it is closer to a vindication of the realists' position. Here, it seems, was a popular story of peoplehood that *restrained* conflict without abolishing it, provided an emotional bond between erstwhile opponents, and presented a common language and point of reference which far from preventing dissent and debate actually offered a means by which innovative arguments could be advanced. In the instance of the civil rights movement, indeed, the realists' might even have had a more powerful case. For, just as Gunnar Myrdal had famously predicted two years earlier, widespread public discussion focusing on the "American creed" enabled African American activists to highlight their cause in terms which powerfully resonated with large sections of the American public.<sup>44</sup> The arrival of the Train in Southern cities also witnessed the first major racially integrated civic events since the civil war as the Heritage Foundation steadfastly refused to allow the Train to be complicit in segregation. The Train's organizers in Maryland even led one woman who had born in slavery, ninety-five year old Annie Grey, publicly through the Train to see Lincoln's drafts of the Emancipation Declaration. As one civil rights activist put it, the connection between African Americans and the Train seemed often to be almost inevitably positive because "we have a special interest when you talk about freedom."<sup>45</sup>

At its best, then, the Freedom Train provided a powerful response to what Ralph Ellison would later call "the puzzle of the one-and-the-many," offering a way of considering "the mystery of how each of us, despite his origin in diverse regions, with

diverse racial, cultural, religions backgrounds” can think of himself as “nevertheless, American.”<sup>46</sup> But before we conclude that the realists’ defence of these early Cold War stories of peoplehood was thoroughly successful, it is crucial to note that there remain many reasons for caution.

Most straightforwardly, of course, there were still undeniable limits on what could politically be expressed within the context of the liberal story advanced on the Train. So even if the Train enabled civil rights activists to find a common platform with “mainstream America,” it clearly prioritized some arguments over others. There was little opportunity to contest the structural, economic inequalities between racial groups in America, for example. Moreover, the relentless up-beat “storybook” history that accompanied the Train gave little sense of how grave injustices had ever been propagated in the American past. Everything in the story of liberal America was good, and always had been, rendering it extremely difficult to identify the sources of the injustices that remained or to apportion responsibility and blame for these injustices even if it was widely felt that they were needed and deserved.

But even more important than these restrictions, there was also the question of precisely *how* the orthodox liberal stories could be contested, opened-up, and reinterpreted. The realist case for stories of peoplehood was reliant on those stories being told and received with a certain degree of irony, even playfulness. The liberal story of events such as the Freedom Train remained plausible as a site for peaceful political contest and innovation only in so far it could be constantly reworked and that reworking required that no single part of the story be treated with too great a degree of reverence or seriousness. All aspects of the story, therefore, had to be open not only to formal critique but to pastiche, satire, and even mockery. The possibility of such jocular distancing -- what Giorgio Agamben has called “studious play”<sup>47</sup> -- was required for two reasons. First, it provided a means by which groups could dismiss aspects of the story that they found unattractive without causing too great a degree of offence. Second, it was also as a way by which groups could come to cope with unattractive elements of the story that would not go away. If, after all, they could find some kind of *fun* in the story was offered, even in the parts that might not necessarily gel with their own ideological convictions,

then they might be able to overcome their hostility towards it or to others whose own allegiance to the story was less affected.

It was for this very reason that the more light-hearted aspects of the Train's journey were central to its very serious political purpose. For all of their apparent silliness, the public festivities of the "Rededication Weeks," the entertainers who accompanied the endless lines to climb aboard, the comic-book stories of Mickey Mouse, Popeye, or Captain Marvel's visits to the Train, and even the "Freedom Fashion Shows" all played their part in engendering the right kind of atmosphere for realist engagement with the liberal story of peoplehood that it offered. They each maintained, in other words, the light touch that was essential to enabling the story to feel widely and genuinely shared rather than exclusive, selective, and coercively imposed. It was almost as if the organizers understood, as Ralph Ellison would later put it, that in order to work effectively stories of peoplehood must provide three things: "hope, perception and *entertainment*." It is only if they combine all three, Ellison explained, that they "might help keep us afloat as we ... negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal."<sup>48</sup>

Yet just as some aspects of the Freedom Train's journey reveal the sources of this success, they also reveal the beginnings of real difficulties. For onerous and exclusive seriousness was never too far away from the Train's mission. The promises, pledges, and prayers testified to that, as did the frequent official discussions from Clark and his colleagues of civic virtue, the avoidance of subversion, and the overcoming of apathy. With such seriousness, however, came a dangerous degree of political ossification. It is far less easy to contest and reinterpret a story of peoplehood imbued with the sort of status that places it beyond irony, and beyond challenge. This, we might recall, was Hartz's central objection to the whole endeavor: it was liberal *dogmatism* that Hartz decried, not liberalism itself. And this dogmatism was an undeniable danger of telling the story of American peoplehood in the spirit of "moral vigor," as Arthur Schlesinger once put it, or of continually emphasizing that "being an American is an arduous task."<sup>49</sup>

This inflexible seriousness was, of course, largely a product of fear, both rational and irrational. There was fear of the Soviet Union, of uncontrollable internal dissent, of economic decline, of moral permissiveness. And yet it was this fear that the early Cold

War realists seemed to miss almost entirely as they encouraged the telling of American stories of peoplehood. They seemed to believe that those telling these stories in the United States would always have the open, ironic character that was required if those stories were to help keep freedom, contest, and innovation alive. But in this they were mistaken. Even if those characteristics were frequently - if not constantly - displayed in the era of the Freedom Train, that is, they were nowhere near as evident as the Cold War continued. Put simply, the early Cold War years were not the later Cold War years. For all of the nuclear danger there was a “relatively less oppressive and less terrifying political climate” in the United States in the late 1940s and very early 1950s than there was in later periods, as David Riesman later explained.<sup>50</sup> And while it may have been relatively safe to encourage the tell stories of peoplehood in times of openness, creativity, and generosity, it quickly became evident that it was much less so in times when fears were almost continually exacerbated and conflicts ever more increasingly intensified.

The next generation, of course, could not fail to notice this limitation. For the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the most ferocious of turns in the “culture wars,” during which stories of peoplehood were invested with a degree of both seriousness and inflexibility that rendered them completely incapable of providing any kind of emotional glue for a divided society. Instead, accounts of essential American political identity – the “cultural/national issues” as they became – were the stuff of brutal Presidential elections, public confrontations between hard-hat wearing construction workers and student protesters, and even campaigns of civil disobedience.<sup>51</sup> By the late 1960s, then, the idea that a politically proposed, partisan informed, story of national identity could bring conflicting groups together so that they could dispute openly and creatively with each other in an atmosphere of respect seemed a very long way away. It is ironic that the early Cold War realists who were otherwise so alert to the present-danger of civil conflict missed the importance of this context almost entirely.

## **Conclusion**

The early Cold War realists hoped that stories of peoplehood could play a crucial but undeniably complex role in American politics. Such stories were intended to hold inevitably conflictual polity together, and to do so without seeking to transcend that

conflict or to prioritize a conservative commitment to the *status quo* over progressive aspirations for a better tomorrow. By providing a shared conceptual language, a shared political history, and, most importantly of all, a shared emotional experience to the rival groups that comprised the American polity, such stories would shape “an American people who are geared to what *is*, and who are yet driven by a sense of what it is possible for human life to be in this society.”<sup>52</sup>

There is much that was greatly admirable in this project. The realists understood both the unavoidable limits and the unquenchable aspirations of political life. They were aware of the dangers of division, yet also conscious of the equally worrisome perils of excessive homogeneity. Too few political commentators today exhibit that ability to hold the essential ambiguity of political life constantly in mind. Yet there was also a grave difficulty in their argument for they failed to emphasize that only a very particular kind of story of peoplehood can play the role they demanded and that it takes a very distinctive social and political context for such a story to flourish.

The question that remains for us is: what can we learn from this debate concerning the early-twenty first century use of stories of peoplehood in American politics? What should we say to those who, following Huntington, Rorty, Sandel, and Smith warmly welcome the role that such stories play in mainstream American politics and encourage their continual telling? The answer is a crucially nuanced one. When our attention is drawn to the deep divisions in American politics and to the need to restrain some of the worst consequences of those divisions without seeking to transcend them entirely, then we might well be attracted to the possibilities of a story of peoplehood. We must remember nonetheless that only the warm, open-ended, flexible, ironic, even playful variants of such stories are, in fact, ever able to play a role in transforming potential destructive political antagonisms into potentially creative and dynamic political agonisms. If we are fortunate enough to live in circumstances that enable those kind of stories to be told -- or even if we are brave enough to be able to help create those circumstances -- then they may well offer us the piece of political magic that their advocates suggest. If not, then we would be better off continuing to heed the warnings of Louis Hartz.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html>

<sup>2</sup> For introductory commentaries and examples, see Martin Bulmer and Anthony Rees (ed.), *Citizenship Today* (London: UCL Press, 1996); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Cecile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jan-Werner Muller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See David Green and Louisa Green (eds.), *The Liberal Tradition in American Politics: Consensus, Polarity, or Multiple Traditions?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005): 33. See too Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*; Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Bernard Yack, "The Myth of the Civic Nation", *Critical Review* 10 (1996): 193-211; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For slightly earlier variants, see Robert E. Goodin, "Rites of Rulers", *British Journal of Sociology* 29 (1978): 281-299 and Steven Lukes, "Political Rituals and Social Integration", *Sociology* 9 (1975): 289-308. For a helpful overview, see Sheila Croucher, "The Politics and Perils of Peoplehood", *International Studies Review* 8 (2006): 77-89.

<sup>7</sup> For examples, see Charles Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Simon Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in*

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*Liberal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002);

<sup>8</sup> See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998): 249-274; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 238-267.

<sup>9</sup> For various perspectives, see David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Robert Booth Fowler, *Believing Skeptics: American Political Intellectuals, 1945-1964* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1978); Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955); Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defenders* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944); Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949)

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1952]); Richard Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: Chicagot University Press, 1955).

<sup>12</sup> For introductions to the Train, see John Bradsher, "Taking America's Heritage to the People", *Prologue* 17 (1985): 228-245; Richard Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert Griffith, "The Selling of America: The Advertising Council and American Politics, 1942-1960", *The Business History Review* 57 (1983): 388-412; Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>13</sup> See G. Bailey, "Why They Flock to the Freedom Train", *New York Times* 1/25/48.

<sup>14</sup> See Bradsher, "Taking America's Heritage to the People": 241.

<sup>15</sup> See Fried, *Russians are Coming!*: 14-15.

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<sup>16</sup> See Fried, *Russians Are Coming!*: 29-33 and Griffith, “The Selling of America”: 388-412.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.lyricstime.com/irving-berlin-the-freedom-Train-lyrics.html>

<sup>18</sup> See Steven Gelber, “A Job You Can’t Lose: Work and Hobbies in the Great Depression”, *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 741-766.

<sup>19</sup> “The Nine Promises of a Good Citizen”, 8/27/48. Port Huron Museum Collection, Port Huron, MI.

<sup>20</sup> For Harding College, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RG9jjxIF20A>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAbqgxPLIE8>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqyXJMcozng>. For more examples, see Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”* and Fried, *The Russians are Coming!*

<sup>21</sup> Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, 185.

<sup>22</sup> See the prolonged discussion in Desmond King and Marc Stears, “The Missing State in Postwar American Thought” in Desmond King and Lawrence Jacobs, *The Unsustainable American State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 116-134.

<sup>23</sup> Louis Hartz, “Goals for Political Science”, *American Political Science Review* 45 (1951): 1003-4.

<sup>24</sup> See Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, 232 and Louis Hartz, “American Political Thought and the American Revolution,” *American Political Science Review* 46 (1952): pp. 321-42

<sup>25</sup> “Clark Explains Funds for Freedom Train”, *New York Times* 6/19/47.

<sup>26</sup> “Freedom Train”, *New York Times* 9/7/47.

<sup>27</sup> See Harold Metz and Charles Thompson, *Authoritarianism and the Individual* (Washington DC: Brookings Institutions, 1950) and Franz Alexander, *Our Age of Unreason: A Study in the Irrational Forces in Social Life* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1950). For excellent discussion, see Andrew Abbott and James T. Sparrow, “Hot War, Cold War: The Structures of Sociological Action, 1940-1955” in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Sociology in America* (Chicago: Chicago University

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Press, 2007): 281-313 and Mark Leff, “The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II”, *Journal of American History* 77 (1991): 1307-12.

<sup>28</sup> Schlesinger, *Vital Center*: 246.

<sup>29</sup> Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”*: 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 131.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *Children of Light*: 152.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph Ellison *Going to the Territory*: 504).

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, *Children of Light*: 11.

<sup>34</sup> Schelsinger, *Vital Center*: 173.

<sup>35</sup> Schlesinger, *Vital Center*: 189.

<sup>36</sup> Schlesinger, *Vital Center*: 245

<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr, *Children of Light*: 6.

<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger, *Vital Center*: 170.

<sup>39</sup> Schlesinger, *Vital Center*: 174.

<sup>40</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” reprinted in John F. Callahan (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Random House, 2003): 505-6.

<sup>41</sup> See Bradsher, “Taking America’s Heritage”: 238.

<sup>42</sup> “Travelling Heirlooms”, *Time*, 11/22/47.

<sup>43</sup> Langston Hughes, “Freedom Train”, *New Republic* 9/15/47.

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<sup>44</sup> See Gunnar Myrdal, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944).

<sup>45</sup> See Bailey, “Throng to the Freedom Train”, and “13,000 See Freedom Train”, *New York Times* 11/23/47.

<sup>46</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” in Callahan (ed.), *Collected Essays*: 207.

<sup>47</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 64.

<sup>48</sup> Ellison, “Introduction to Invisible Man” in Callahan (ed.), *Collected Essays*: 487.

<sup>49</sup> Ellison, “Hidden Name”, 209

<sup>50</sup> David Riesman, “Preface to the 1961 Edition” in David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): lvii.

<sup>51</sup> See Byron E. Shafer, *The Two Majorities and the Puzzle of Modern American Politics* (Lawrence KA: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” in Callahan (ed.), *Collected Essays*: 588.