The Hartz Mountain

"What Is Still Living in 'Consensus' History and Pluralist Social Theory" by Leo P. Ribuffo, in *American Studies International* (Feb. 2000), George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. 20052; "The Perils of Particularism: Political History after Hartz" by John Gerring, in *Journal of Policy History* (1999: No. 3), St. Louis Univ., 3800 Lindell Blvd., P.O. Box 56907, St. Louis, Mo. 63156-0907.

The so-called consensus history of the 1950s—typified by Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) and stressing the liberal, Lockean values most Americans supposedly shared—has long been out of vogue in the academy, rejected as a Cold War relic. Recent historians have viewed the American past instead through the lenses of race, class, and gender, focusing on particular groups, cases, and eras. But have these historians been missing the forest for the trees? Ribuffo, a historian at George Washington University, and Gerring, a political scientist at Boston University, suggest it's time for a fresh look at the old "consensus" orthodoxy.

The multiculturalist approach has borne some valuable fruit, notes Ribuffo, including detailed descriptions of "the lives of women as well as men, gays as well as heterosexuals, artisans and industrial workers as well as members of the old and new middle class. We know about their leisure time and their love lives as well as their occupational mobility and voting habits." But historians on the "certain kind of left" that has triumphed in academe since the early 1980s—which borrows concepts and issues from literary criticism and linguistically oriented philosophy and anthropology—have been reluctant "to examine the whole United States for fear of what might be discovered," Ribuffo says.

He and his fellow historians, he writes, "need to re-examine the degree of consensus in American life past and present," as well as the extent to which common convictions about politics, government, race, religion, and ethnicity "were imposed [rather than] accepted voluntarily. . . . [We] should not reject out of hand the possibility that most Americans have shared significant beliefs and values," even if some have varied over the centuries.

Gerring agrees. No comprehensive thesis about the American past "has yet been formulated," he says, "with power and sweep to match *The Liberal Tradition in America*." That still may happen. But, Gerring asks, "are we—the current generation of writers—seeking to overthrow the old theory simply because it is old, and continually failing because it happens to offer the best arrangement of the facts? This may well be the case."

Spinning Out

Paul Taylor, a former *Washington Post* political reporter and the director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, on the decline of American political discourse, in *Mother Jones* (May-June 2000):

Let's follow the vicious cycle here. We the public give the broadcast industry our airwaves for free, in return for their commitment to serve the public interest. At election time, the industry turns around and sells airtime to candidates, fueling a money chase that saps public confidence in the political process and restricts the field of candidates to the wealthy and their friends. The money pays for ads that reduce political discourse to its least attractive elements: The spots tend to be synthetic, deceptive, inflammatory, and grating.

As campaigns choke on money and ads, the public drifts away from politics in boredom or disgust. Ratings-sensitive broadcasters then scale back on substantive political coverage—forcing candidates to rely even more on paid ads as their sole means of getting a message out on television. And so the cycle keeps spinning.