Yale University

From the SelectedWorks of David Mayhew

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Tribute to Sam Beer at panel honoring him, annual APSA conference, Chicago

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Sam and I go way back. Around 1960 at Harvard.
I took his excellent graduate seminar, Government 212, “Comparative Government: Political Parties,” which was chiefly about the UK. But it spilled over into the USA. I remember a week on the Michigan Democratic party of the 1950s featuring the UAW and Soapy Williams. We did the usual great suspects in the course—Duverger, Michels, Ostrogorski, Weber, and then some. Collingwood had a role.

I have proof I was there! Here is that old syllabus plus my notes!

Once Sam took me to a dinner with high Democratic party muckmucks, and I remember I used to visit him, probably pester him, in the basement of Littauer in his office next to Louis Hartz’s.

Ever since, I have drawn on Sam’s instruction and example in my thinking, teaching, and writing.

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I have been asked to “cover his contributions” to the study of American politics, but don’t talk too long. This is a difficult juxtaposition but I’ll try.

I’d like to organize those contributions under four rubrics:

A) Sam framed American politics in his 1965 book on British politics, British Politics in the Collectivist Age. This was about the UK but he had the USA continually in mind.

It featured those wonderful categories: Old Tory, Old Whig, Liberal, Radical, and Collectivist. This was a UK workout but Sam gave it considerable resonance in the USA.

In the face of that UK evolution, the USA proved to be resolutely constant in its dualism of liberalism and radicalism. This interpretation was much like Hartz’s, which also featured dualism within an envelope.

So: we had liberal and radicalism from early on, the late 18th century. This jibes with not just Hartz but with Gordon Wood’s later work that places the coming of U.S. democratic politics in the late 19th century. Also, the USA ducked having “collectivism” in the 20th century. It was liberalism and radicalism throughout. There are ramifications. For one thing, Sam traces “the weakness of our parties” to
the radical spirit that brought individual expression and fissiparousness. Also, the “casual majorities” of the US system impeded any collectivism.

I see two general lessons from this interpretation:
--Think comparative, if you are trying to study US politics. We see this with Sam continually, in his recent work drawing on Canada as well as the earlier UK work.
--The two centuries of relative sameness of American politics is real. In this respect the USA differs from not only the UK but also more so Germany, Russia, Japan and the rest. That means that for many purposes the USA since 1789 can belong in one continuing dataset—in studying, for example, Congress, presidential behavior, and even elections. This is wonderful for longitudinal analysis.

B) Sam has highlighted the exercise of “party government” as a conceptual as well as empirical phenomenon. The 1940s through the 1960s. Yes, this was chiefly UK territory with the Attlee government and all. Yet in a diminished degree and an aspiration it was American also.

In the USA, it was the New Deal (or the Fair Deal) through the Great Society. The Great Society was the closest approximation to the Attlee government of 1945-51. In the USA also we had Keynesianism as a packaging device, a labor union base, a continuing Democratic party program of considerable importance, an aspiration to coherent governing, as well as the doctrine of party government as witness the APSA report of 1950.

Also, that patch of mid-20th-century US experience offered trademark locutions. Sam is great on this. In class I have been using his piece on the coming of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” into prominence in the 1930s and 1940s. Before that these terms didn’t amount to much in the USA. This isn’t generally known. For one thing, FDR seems to have copped the use of “liberal” from the Asquith liberals in the UK. Recently many American political scientists have been making a big mistake exporting those terms as a political frame back into the 19th century USA. Not good. Locutions are important. They probably stuck to a new substance in the USA of the 1930s and 1940s.

C) Sam saw and analyzed the distinctive political juncture of the late 1960s-early 1970s in the USA. Things were happening in lots of places but certainly in the USA. That meant:
--the extraordinary new centralization of policymaking in DC
--the expansion of the American national state
--the coming of “technocratic politics”—as in the antipoverty program
--the coming of the “intergovernmental lobby”—all those mayors and governors and others showing up in DC often hats in hand
--yet also “the cultural revolution” of those times
--and the weakening of the parties, making any further move toward party
government unlikely

D) Most recently, Sam has reconstrued the nature of the American founding and the
American nation since that time in his 1993 book, To Make a Nation.

I love this book, and I have relied on it in a big way in my own recent writing.

A “national republic,” Sam tells us, was crafted in the 1770s and 1780s. Not a
decentralized confederation, and not a compact among pre-existing autonomous
states. A new national state was “ordained by the people” in the late 18th century,
not through a compact among states.

Also the new national state was to feature “government by discussion” at the center.
Policies would be produced through fishbowl deliberation among government
officials in a fashion that would engage the U.S. population and be patrolled by
electoral accountability.

The intellectual basis for this construction? Sam highlights Harrington of the 17th
century and Hume of the 18th century, plus the constitutional founder James
Wilson. This elevates H&H to a parity with Montesquieu and Locke. It elevates
Wilson to a pedestal with Hamilton, Madison and the rest. (Bob McCloskey made
this latter move too.) This is a new way of looking at things, and in my view it
should prevail. It is a major statement. It is a correction of dominant 20th-century
scholarship in history and political science. Beard the dualist and Dahl the pluralist
abandoned the idea of “government by discussion” in favor of bargaining or
competition rooted in societal sectors. The “refine and enlarge” content of
Federalist #10 went out the window. I say: bring it back! Let’s have H&H plus
James Wilson. With them we get a touch of Dewey and Habermas (his public
sphere). James Wilson also pioneered in seeing the potential of a “democratic
culture.”

We see again in this book, once it is combined with Sam’s recent work on Canada,
the utility of a comparative perspective. There isn’t any “national republic” of this
sort in Canada where things tend to proceed through bargaining among provinces
rather than through consequential public deliberation at the center. Also, a
“national republic” isn’t emerging in the European Community.

These are the four chief rubrics I see. What a rich menu of contributions it has
been!