

Ira Katznelson: Toward A Useful Historical Political Science of Liberalism

Richard M. Valelly, *Swarthmore College*

Over a career that spans the late 1960s to the present, APSA President Ira Katznelson has mounted a long and fruitful interrogation of political liberalism in the United States and Europe—asking for definition of its many forms, their origins, their strengths and weaknesses, and what kinds there can be. In doing such work, Katznelson has reframed several consequential phenomena and issues. They include African-American political incorporation over the course of the 20th century and the role of partisan strategy and policy design (as opposed to racial attitudes among Whites) in structuring such incorporation, the roots of American exceptionalism in the lived experience of “class,” and, most recently, the surprising extent to which rational choice and historical institutionalism conceptually overlap.

Louis Hartz’s masterpiece, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, (1955) serves well as a point of both reference and contrast. In it, Hartz presented a two-fold challenge to the American political science profession. That summons nicely illuminates Katznelson’s intellectual preoccupations and contributions.

Hartz’s book issued, first, an invitation to his contemporaries and successors to grasp how monolithically liberal a regime America is—a consensus so strong that, paradoxically, given liberalism’s foundation in reason, America’s Lockean liberalism is unthinking, as it were, a kind of political fundamentalism. But, second, *The Liberal Tradition* asked Americanists to place the regime’s fundamentalist liberalism in comparative perspective—and to thereby appreciate that its roles and influence resulted from circumstance, that is, an unusual confluence of apparent classlessness for nearly a century and long

Dr. Richard M. Valelly is professor of political science at Swarthmore College. He is the author of *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

geographic isolation.

In the half century since its publication, many distinguished political scientists have responded to Hartz’s twin insights by either elaborating on or contradicting them. Samuel P. Huntington, J. David Greenstone, Michael Rogin, Karen Orren, Judith Shklar, James Morone, and Rogers Smith—these are just a few of the scholars who have pursued the problems and issues sketched by Hartz’s vision and imagination.

Ira Katznelson joins them in recasting and enriching Hartz’s intellectual bequest. Like Hartz, who was deeply read in Freud, Marx, and counter-Enlightenment thought, Katznelson intellectually and imaginatively holds American political culture and life at some mental distance as he examines its behavior, policies, and institutions. That capacity to distance himself, in turn, has been augmented by a mastery of non-liberal, normatively refreshing sources of political, social, and moral knowledge as diverse as the Talmud and Western Marxism, for example, or the powerful sociology of the “color line” in world history (and the related “double consciousness”) that were fashioned by W.E.B. Du Bois.

Katznelson’s elaboration of the Hartzian legacy is markedly positive and empirical. It pivots on the recognition and identification of many liberalisms across time and space in both American and European politics. There is no liberal regime *per se*. Instead, liberal politics takes many different forms in social, labor-market, and economic policy, in bureaucratic, legislative, and executive institutional evolution, and in the lived political experience of citizens and non-citizens (at the polls, at the workplace, and in cities.) It coexists with and is bent—even transformed—by illiberal currents and legacies. The promethean nature of liberalism is particularly clear in the American

APSA President (2005)

Ira Katznelson

Ruggles Professor of
Political Science and
History
Columbia University

B.A.
Columbia University
1966

Ph.D.
Cambridge University
1969



case. A Southern-influenced mutation of liberalism emerged here, brought about by the interlacing of Jim Crow, Wilsonian Progressivism, and the New Deal. This variant—what Katznelson once dubbed a fusion of Sweden and South Africa—has been a particularly engrossing area for his research.

Katznelson’s taxonomic approach toward the liberal Prometheus has of course steeped him in Enlightenment and liberal political thought. He has published critical appreciations, co-authored with Andreas Kalyvas, of Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Staël, and Adam Smith. For Katznelson, the charting of liberalism’s tangible policy, behavioral, and institutional correlates has also required deeply historical attention to struggles over class formation, economic and political emergency, race relations, gendering, immigration, religious tradition, colonialism, subjugation to and release from Soviet hegemony (or Cold War tension), and, last but not hardly least, Jewish-Gentile interactions.

The result of Katznelson’s cartography of liberalism’s forms, challenges, and variations is an encompassing—and continually growing—bibliography crowned by such prizes as the 2005 David and Elaine Spitz Award of the Conference of Political Thought, given to the best book in liberal and/or democratic theory published two years earlier, and the 2005 David Easton Award of APSA’s Founda-

tions of Political Thought Section, both honoring *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (2003). Honor and recognition have also come in the form of election to the American Philosophical Society (in 2004) and to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (in 2000).

Katznelson is the sole author of seven scholarly books, co-author with Margaret Weir of an eighth, co-author with Mark Kesselman and Alan Draper of an American politics textbook (now in its fifth edition), co-editor of six scholarly volumes, the author of some 65 academic articles and essays, and the author of nearly a dozen more pieces in serious periodicals of political opinion and argument. Happily for the profession, the vast majority of Katznelson's corpus is in English—but whoever writes the full biography will require knowledge of French, German, and Spanish (and will even have to commission someone fluent in Finnish to read an interview published in a Finnish journal). Somewhere Louis Hartz is undoubtedly smiling at this multilingual prospect.

Katznelson's contributions and findings take his colleagues up many roads to a wide range of vantage points. An abbreviated listing would include, first, his recasting of the study of race relations in the U.S. and Britain by laying the basis for a structural-historical approach toward Black disadvantage and Black political behavior and struggle. This work has been carried forward by, among others, Dan Kryder, Anthony Marx, Desmond King, and Robert Lieberman. Katznelson has identified American 19th-century city life as the primary locus of the American variant on working-class formation. He has underscored (along with Margaret Weir) that the public school movement was forged in a cross-class alliance of working- and middle-class reformers which generated a public good of incalculable significance to American life. He has shown that political scientists frame their careers and work agendas in response to enormous ruptures in social and political life as well as to the internal ongoing conversation which we call "normal science." In his latest book, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*, (2005) he shows that the structural bias in New Deal social policy toward allocating public benefits to White citizens requires re-thinking that era as a seedbed of long-term Black disadvantage. This thesis runs contrary to established accounts claiming that WWII's impact on the socio-economic status of African Americans sufficed to resolve disadvantage.

Remarkably, the above sketch provides only one "pass" over Katznelson's achievements. A chronological sketch of his career reveals additional themes that place his exceptional intellectual fecundity in striking relief.

Chronology of a Career

The other motifs of Katznelson's career emerge across four institutional associations: a brief stretch on the Columbia faculty as a junior member, successive decade-long associations with the University of Chicago and then the New School for Social Research, and, finally, a return to Columbia in his current appointment as Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History.

Even brief attention to Katznelson's record reveals several leading traits: demanding administrative service while sustaining high academic productivity; creative encounter and conversation with allied disciplines—political sociology and labor and political history; capacity for setting scholarly agendas—both in editorial direction of leading scholarly journals and via trusteeship and editorship at university presses; great delight in the give-and-take of workshops and colloquia, ranging from directing the Center for the Study of Industrial Societies at the University of Chicago (1982–1983) to membership on the Research Planning Group of the Council for European Studies (1988–1990) to his current direction of the American Institutions Project at the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy at Columbia University (2000–); the commitment to travel and guest lectureship—at Tougaloo College (1971), as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar (1990–1991), as Commonwealth Fund Lecturer at University College, London (1995), and as Page-Barbour Lecturer at the University of Virginia (1999). His concern for the development of useable knowledge about social policy has led him, as well, to a close working relationship with perhaps the leading sponsor of social policy research in the U.S., the Russell Sage Foundation, where he has twice held visiting research fellowships. From 1999–2002 he chaired the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Katznelson has been unstinting in giving time and energy to the American Political Science Association and its committees and organized sections, serving, for example, along with Helen Milner, as program co-chair of the 2000 Annual Meeting. Last, but by no means least, Katznelson has inspired many undergraduate and graduate students and junior scholars at Chicago, the New School, Co-

lumbia, and elsewhere. He is well-known for tirelessly and cheerfully shouldering the responsibilities of reading and commenting fully on the work-in-progress of students and colleagues. As Andrew Grossman, a former student, has aptly written: "Personally modest and unaffected, Katznelson remains true to one of the ultimate values in a free society: He is a teacher" (Utter and Lockhart 2002, s.v. "Katznelson, Ira).

Katznelson graduated summa cum laude in history in 1966 with a Phi Beta Kappa key from the College of Columbia University. Upon graduating, he was directed by David Truman, then dean of Columbia, toward study at St. John's College of Cambridge University, where Katznelson studied on a Kellett and later a Danforth Fellowship. Within three years, Katznelson had completed his Ph.D. in history at Cambridge and founded the journal *Politics & Society*, which continues today as a lively forum of fresh, qualitative political science and sociology. Within four years, Katznelson published his elegantly conceived comparative study of urban race relations in the U.S. and Britain, *Black Men, White Cities: Race, Politics, and Migration in the United States, 1900–1930, and Britain, 1948–1968* ([1973] 1976), which analyzed the foundations of clientelistic integration of Black migrants to cities and underscored the persistence and impact of these political relationships in later limiting the terms of political incorporation for African-American voters and politicians and for their counterparts in England.

By 1979, a decade after submitting his Ph.D. at Cambridge, Katznelson was a full professor and chair in the department of political science at the University of Chicago, had been elected to the APSA Council, had joined the editorial advisory board of *Political Science Quarterly* (on which he still serves), and had received research support from the National Science Foundation, the German Marshall Fund, and the National Institute of Education of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Also, he published his second book, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* ([1981] 1983), a richly historical comparison of New York and Chicago showing how ethnic and racial antagonisms came to cut across and suppress class mobilization in Northern American cities with large numbers of blue-collar voters. Katznelson had rapidly traced, in other words, what ordinarily counts as a full, successful career. Yet many more notable achievements lay in the future.

Moving to the New School for Social Research in 1983, Katznelson accepted

the Loeb Professorship of Political and Social Science on the Graduate Faculty and began a term as dean of the Graduate Faculty. During this time he co-edited *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and North America* with Aristide Zolberg, who also went to the New School from Chicago. The volume comprised articles by Amy Bridges and Martin Shefter, among others, to provide path-breaking accounts of the linkages between worker mobilization and party-system evolution in the U.S. over the 19th century, prior to the establishment of the alliance between the Democratic party and the AF of L and the CIO.

Katznelson did much to establish the New School political science department as a center for work in American political development, gathering in the process several scholars who would soon help to energize the subfield and training a new generation of graduate students in APD. Two new monographs appeared. *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* ([1985] 1988), co-authored with Margaret Weir, explored why and how public educational systems moved from being locations for productive reformist cooperation across class lines to becoming battlegrounds of racial and ethnic strife—and what the unrealized alternatives to that outcome were and are. *Marxism and the City* (1992) critically surveyed the influence of Marxist thought on urban sociology from Engels to the present.

During his New School appointment, Katznelson received research support from the Ford Foundation. He also joined the editorial boards of *International Labor and Working Class History* and the *Journal of Policy History*. With Theda Skocpol and Martin Shefter, he founded “Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives,” a highly regarded series from Princeton University Press.

With Pierre Birnbaum, Katznelson produced a co-edited volume on profoundly important processes (too little studied by political scientists) in the evolution of European and trans-Atlantic liberalism: Jewish emancipation from the strictures and exclusions that dated to the Middle Ages—and the ensuing patterns of assimilation that have been so perilous for Jews and Judaism. The result, *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship* (1995), analyzes polities ranging from those of Turkey to Russia to the United States, among others, and traces the comparative developmental variation and influence of Jewish-Gentile relations in the wake of the Enlightenment, Romanti-

cism, and the counter-Enlightenment.

Ira Katznelson’s appointment at Columbia University as Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History began in 1994. In the intervening decade, Katznelson’s exceptional productivity has surged, as has his involvement in professional service (the presidency of the Social Science History Association in 1997–1998, co-program chair of the 2000 APSA meeting, service on the international advisory board of the Institute for Human Sciences of Vienna and Boston from 1997–present, and a term (2003–2004) as acting vice president for the Arts and Sciences and dean of the faculty at Columbia University).

In the past decade, Katznelson has thought about the political choices that emerged from the unanticipated opportunity for progress and human freedom that came with the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe. Reflecting on the opposite extreme, he has also closely investigated how political scientists have responded to shocking political and social events and crises, such as the rise of totalitarianism, world war, and the Holocaust. The results have been *Liberalism’s Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik* (1996) and *Desolation and Enlightenment* (2003).

A third book, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (2005), is meant to shake up the premises of public discourse about public policy for improving race relations in the U.S. public debate about policies to remedy Black disadvantage recognizes that Black disadvantage was imposed through, for instance, job discrimination and bias in public educational expenditure. But the discussion rarely recognizes the public investment in White advantage ratcheted up over several decades of activist government from the 1930s into the 1960s—in, for instance, collective bargaining and old-age income security.

Katznelson has also published several major co-edited volumes since his move back to Columbia. *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* (2002), co-edited with Martin Shefter, collects methodologically eclectic papers that are unified by the conviction that it is long past due for Americanists to integrate “second image reversed” factors into their accounts of American politics. Since the book’s publication, the Chinese central bank’s dollar-peg/U.S. debt purchase strategy for Chinese export growth has collaterally facilitated both the GOP drive toward fiscal imbalance and war without direct taxation—a confluence that highlights the book’s acute relevance. In addition, Katznelson and colleague Helen

Milner guided the centennial edition of *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (2002), a volume which grew out of the authors’ collaboration in arranging the program of the 2000 APSA Annual Meeting.

The most recent turn in Katznelson’s abundant output is an ambitious, promising initiative to substantively conjoin rational choice and historical institutionalism. Many political scientists have long recognized that the two areas of inquiry—often seen as rival sensibilities—actually overlap conceptually in ways that await full elaboration. Working with Barry Weingast, Katznelson has developed a co-edited volume, *Preferences and Situations: Points of Intersection Between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism* (2005), that lays the cornerstone for this promising project.

Working with John Lapinski and Roze Razaghian, and funded by the National Science Foundation, Katznelson is also developing major empirical support for a new coding of congressional roll-call data. Katznelson, Lapinski, and Razaghian (KLR) have developed a substantive congressional roll-call coding approach that corrects for an inadvertent bias in NOMINATE’s underlying coding toward so-called low dimensionality and are developing what will be a public-use data set of all votes from the 1st through the 100th Congress. This KLR database will thus offer a widely useful taxonomy of the content and impact of congressional lawmaking over American history that can be used in tandem with the spatial maps of periods and roll calls provided by NOMINATE (and its desktop tools, Voteview and Animate). The roles of political parties and cross-party coalitions in making landmark statutes, and in driving or containing policy innovative periods (e.g., the New Deal), will therefore be searchable with great accuracy—and move the study of statutory change well past the case study, “Congress-makes-a-law” approach. The prospects for revamping the historical and contemporary study of American politics are considerable, to say the least.¹

Conclusion

Katznelson has greatly advanced our knowledge of American politics, in large part through adoption of the kind of comparative-historical stance that Hartz pioneered. Hartz’s still startling insights into Lockean liberalism in the U.S.—the idea that it was and is unchallenged in our domestic war of ideas, and for that reason it was and is a one-eyed variant—have, in turn, positive corollaries. These inferences illuminate the cumulative dimension of

Katznelson's work.

Hartz's insights imply that close analysis of U.S. institutions and policies will show that they instantiate liberal ideals in perplexingly incomplete ways. Research on political debate will also show that real exclusions rooted in economy and society will inevitably be recognized as temporary aberrations—paradoxically permitting their great persistence. In his work on race relations and American exceptionalism, Katznelson has provided provocative findings that can be seen, in retrospect, to validate these salient and observable implications of Hartzian theory.

Katznelson's analysis of the social control arrangements that White-controlled urban parties enacted in Northern cities to channel the earliest immigration of African Americans shows that these devices determined the delay in and incompleteness of minority political incorporation which persist to this day. Class-based alliances between Blacks and Whites were (and are) a live possibility—but largely to the extent that White workers experienced class. Yet the spatial arrangement of urban

industrial life meant workplace experience of class and off-work experience of ethnicity and particularism. Public schools have come to reflect that bifurcation of lived social experience; suburbanization has reinforced it. Economic solidarity has therefore never been a particularly strong counterweight to the legacies of early minority political incorporation. And, as Katznelson has shown in his analytical reconstruction of the New Deal and its internally “red-lined” panoply of policies, the federal “welfare state” profile has tended to reinforce urban and local racial and ethnic orders. Black migration and the emergence of an American social democracy have not sufficed, in other words, to undo racial exclusions—a view that shows how deep a shadow the 19th century has cast on the 20th. Yet the discourse of temporary aberration, rooted in the conceptual repertoire that Hartz dissected, guided and continues to guide policy discussion—and continues to trigger cycles of hope and disappointment in public initiative.

In addition to structural-historical analysis of actual political liberalism in

the U.S., Katznelson has laid new foundations for fruitful exchange between rational choice and historical institutionalism. Such attention to the promising opportunities built into the recent evolution of the American politics subfield has resulted in the mentoring of gifted young scholars—and in a major new dataset. With it, other scholars will be able to replicate or revise the substantive findings about American politics and the liberal polity in the U.S. which Katznelson and other Americanists have generated—and to develop new understandings of policy and its impact over time on political coalitions and political liberalism.

Katznelson's career has, in summary, been one of vast output and self-renewing intellectual energy carried out in New York, Chicago, and, again, New York. The return to Columbia has inaugurated the most assured and productive period in Katznelson's journey within political science—a shift that also brings him to the presidency of the American Political Science Association.

Note

1. For an early statement, see Ira Katznelson, John Lapinski, and Rose Razaghian, “Policy Space and Voting Coalitions in Congress: The

Bearing of Policy on Politics, 1930–1954,” ISERP Working Paper 01-02, Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, Columbia

University; www.iserp.columbia.edu/research/working_papers/papers/.

References

- Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*. New York: Harcourt and Brace.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2005. *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- , Alan Draper, and Mark Kesselman. 2005. *Politics of Power: A Critical Introduction to American Government*. Boston: Wadsworth.
- , and Barry Weingast, eds. 2005. *Preferences and Situations: Points of Intersection between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- . 2003. *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- , and Andreas Kalyvas. 2003. “Embracing Liberalism: Germane de Staël's Farewell to Republicanism.” In *From Republicanism to National Community: Reconsiderations of Enlightenment Political Thought*, ed. Paschalidis Kitromilides. Oxford: Voltaire Press.
- , and Helen Milner, eds. 2002. *Political Science: State of the Discipline*, Centennial Edition. New York: W.W. Norton for the American Political Science Association.
- , and Martin Shefter, eds. 2002. *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- , John Lapinski, and Rose Razaghian. “Policy Space and Voting Coalitions in Congress: The Bearing of Policy on Politics, 1930–1954.” ISERP Working Paper 01-02, Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, Columbia University. www.iserp.columbia.edu/research/working_papers/papers/.
- , and Andreas Kalyvas. 2001. “The Rhetoric of the Market: Adam Smith on Recognition, Speech, and Exchange.” *Review of Politics* 63 (summer): 549–579.
- . 1999. “‘We Are Modern Men’: Benjamin Constant and the Discovery of an Immanent Liberalism.” *Constellations* 6 (December): 513–539.
- . 1996. *Liberalism's Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- , and Pierre Birnbaum, eds. 1995. *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 1992. *Marxism and the City*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- , and Artstide Zolberg, eds. 1986. *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and North America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- , and Margaret Weir. [1985] 1988. *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal*. New York: Basic Books, 1985; paperback edition, with new introduction, University of California Press, 1988.
- . [1981] 1983. *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981; paperback edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- . [1973] 1976. *Black Men, White Cities: Race, Politics, and Migration in the United States, 1900–1930, and Britain, 1948–1968*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Phoenix paperback edition, with new introduction, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Utter, Glenn H., and Charles Lockhart, eds. 2002. *American Political Scientists: A Dictionary*, 2nd edition. Foreword by Robert Jervis. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.