

# Business and government

Government



Every country has a government of some sort, but each government is different. They differ in the way they organize and conduct their political life - their mode and style of politics. In his writing on the Italian Renaissance, Jakob Burckhardt indicated that the people of the Renaissance made even the government a "work of art" (Sternsher 76). The American people make their government, as they make their businesses, a great organizational achievement: they speak of the business and government.

This mood continued to be present in American through the history and reflected above all in American literature. In the *Genius of American Politics*, Daniel Boorstin was working toward an examining American history in the same terms. Government, Boorstin believed, was a social instrument, and legal philosophy was a method of justifying the interests the economy.

Legal logic, as the writer suggested, depicted a rationalization of social interests. The American state system had been formed on the basis of a highly conservative social philosophy. As the writer began searching for the basis of human values, Boorstin was led to the study of American history. Boorstin believed that the philosophical foundations answer the question of social value system.

In the *Genius of American Politics*, Daniel Boorstin analyzes three views that American historians have taken to the subject of government and business in the twentieth century: the Progressive, the counter-Progressive, and the New Left (sometimes called neo-Progressive). The Progressive view dominated from about 1910 to about 1950. In the period from about 1950 to about 1965 the counter-Progressive view was more prevalent.

The Progressives believed in the effectiveness of government effort, while the counter-Progressives were “not much for government action.” “The main government reality” in the counter-Progressive opinion was culture, a uniting figure, rather than class, causing disagreement factor and the main characteristic of the Progressive description of American society. Therefore critics of counter-Progressive literature called them “consensus.” Boorstin is the leading generalizer of consensus as a principle for describing American political history. Boorstin's interpretations are quite different from other counterparts. Boorstin in some way captured the meaning of America.

Daniel J. Boorstin has his view of the history of government in a mixed economy of American ideology. Unlike Wise, Boorstin sees conformity not as the result of universal adherence to a definite ideology but as the result of the actual absence of ideology. Boorstin writes about America's non-ideological character, which shows a pragmatic adaptation to life on the American land. Boorstin claims that Americans have always been nonideological. Many historians argue this claim and Boorstin's characterization of *The Genius of American Politics*, where Boorstin denies the view that “revolutionary generation was profoundly dogmatic, was deeply fascinated with political ideology - the ideology of Republicanism” (Robert 54).

In *The Genius of American Politics*, Boorstin introduces a long, good thesis which one can clarify only with great effort. Boorstin thinks that because American people did not use political theory to build their society, theory is therefore fruitless to explain it. The first chapter of *The Genius of American*

Politics has the title How Belief in the Existence of an American Theory Has Made a Theory Superfluous.

This title does not tell the readers precisely what the chapter is about. It does become clear that Boorstin is chiefly occupied with Americans' making, some basic assumptions which serve the function of a theory. But he also asks the readers: “ Is there perhaps a theory behind our theory, or behind our lack of theory, which might itself have some validity as a conscious principle of political thought?” (Boorstin, 1953: 7)

In *The Genius of American Politics* Boorstin presents the opinion about a perfect original doctrine under the title *Values Given by the Past: The Preformation Ideal*. He takes the word of “ preformation” from out-of-date biology. It is “ the idea that all parts of an organism pre-exist in perfect miniature in the seed. . . . It assumes that the values and theory of the nation were given once and for all in the very beginning.” In response to the question, why did Americans come to hold “ the belief that an explicit political theory is somehow superfluous precisely because we already somehow possess a satisfactory equivalent?,”

Boorstin cites: (1) the beginning of American civilization at a definite period in recent history, which has relieved us of the need to invent a mythology of original settlement; (2) the brevity of our history, which makes it easy for us to assume that our national life has had a clear purpose from the start; (3) the heterogeneous character of our population: “ outcast Europeans have been eager to believe that they can find here a simplicity of theory lacking in the countries from which they came”; (4) “ the fact that we have a written constitution and even our special way of interpreting it”: we combine

flexibility in applying the Constitution to specific practical problems while our framework, our political theory, remains rigid and unexperimental; (5) the practicality that is one of the main qualities of the doctrine in whose original perfection we believe: this may help us to grasp that “ unique combination of empiricism and idealism which has characterized American political life” (Boorstin, 1953: 16).

The Genius of American Politics describes American political development in the interaction of inheritance, environment, and Boorstin’s own version of the genius of American politics. In The Genius of American Politics, Boorstin describes the significance of the debate that preceded the conflict for the American way of political thought. From this follows the importance of the intellectual outcome of the history of American political thought for present social value system.

This discussion of the role of ideas in history is routine, but it is described here as a frame for some points on the work of Boorstin. Boorstin's depiction of American history does not fit into this scheme. Boorstin's identification of the nonideological causes of consensus in The Genius of American Politics substantially deprives heritage. “ For the Puritans,” he writes, “ were the first, and perhaps the last, sizeable community in American history to import from Europe a fully developed and explicit social dogma, and try to live by it on this continent” (Boorstin, 1953: 36).

The Puritans had got their ideas in Europe, and then they lost them in America. Then we can say that ideas have really had a role in history, but not in American history. There was interval, since the decay of Puritan dogma happened over several generations, but this dogma “ was not so much

defeated by the dogmas of anti-Puritanism as it was simply assimilated to the conditions of life in America" (Boorstin, 1953: 53).

This chapter has the idea of "givenness" that contains three points. The first two points are the "preformation ideal" or "the notion that we have received our values as a gift from the past," from the explicit ideals of the Founding Fathers, and the notion that American values are a gift from the present, "that our theory is always implicit in our institutions." They are presented as axioms. The third point, which links the other two, Pole (1969) writes, paraphrasing Boorstin, is "the homogeneity, the continuity of American history in a steady stream, free from violent oscillations of regime and void of violent ideological challenges"(220).

What is the "genius" of America? It is the idea of "givenness," a somewhat deep concept that Boorstin uses in order to portray that particular quality that is America. Givenness has three points. First, Americans devised the approach to their life that stresses the preformation, historical aspects of our nation. The American people believe that "we have received our values as a gift from the past; that the earliest settlers or Founding Fathers equipped our nation at its birth with a perfect and complete political theory"(Boorstin, 1953: 9).

The essence of America, in other words, is its confidence that it has an essence. Second, the idea of givenness is the "notion that in America we receive values as a gift from the present, that our theory is always implicit in our institutions." The choice of the word "gift" is a good one; it too relieves us of the necessity of thought and conflict over ideas. Third, the idea of

givenness is a “ belief in the continuity or homogeneity of our history, . . . so that our past merges indistinguishably into our present” (Boorstin, 1953: 10).

The result of this easygoing view, one which the Eisenhower administration enshrined in its political practice by refusing to consider values except on the level of the cliché, is the American belief, as described by Boorstin, that “ explicit political theory is superfluous precisely because we already somehow [!] possess a satisfactory equivalent” (Boorstin, 1953: 8). The equivalent is the sense of givenness.

Boorstin teaches the readers and today’s world how to look at our past and find that it has always manifested the values of no-value, a belief in givenness. And thus, the history says that American people were born free, that all they had to do was to protect their freedom, and that they were therefore conservatives. Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, of course, become pillars of conservatism in this respect.

As for the Civil War, it too was an explosion of conservative feeling; neither side followed a new vision of society, no new political issues were raised, and the conflict was a simple normative one. The Civil War, as interpretation of the Constitution, was an illustration of the continuity, not the discontinuity, of American history. And so it goes. History of America becomes a series of not very significant legal debates.

But it can be a good cause, the cause of anti-ideology. Boorstin creates the meaning of the new history. He writes that Americans have debated about values in the past. Much of what passes for debate, he writes, in America, is simply an endeavor to tell people what they think already, for Americans slur

over differences and refuse to sharpen definitions. To Boorstin disagreement is un-American, since it is characteristic of Europe, not America - of a disintegrating society.

The debate is of no value and is undoubtedly a threat to people. But that is the way of the Conservative Mood. If values are automatic, there is no need to argue about them. Nor is there any need for politics to become the scene of important encounters between distinctive ideas. The politics of the United States for Boorstin is a low temperature disagreement over means between two parties who share the same basic values. Hence ideological distinctions between the two parties are “small,” for each party shares the “same vision of the kind of society there ought to be in the United States” (Newman 90).

There are few in the United States who do not accept the predominant values of its society; hence the lack of political theory, for who wants to explore what everyone agrees on? Since Boorstin does not tell the readers what he means by ends and means, or consider how the one can be separated from the other, or examine the reality of parties in the United States, his belief that the two-party system is a gentlemanly contest of no particular meaning is not, perhaps, as important as he might like to think.

But this is the point. The genius of American politics is that America has no politics. The new historian looks upon parties with an amused and tolerant eye and a shrugging of shoulders, but he cannot see that it really matters whether one or the other party achieves office. It is significant, however, to realize this view of the Conservative Mood, because their downgrading of parties, their attempt to create apathy on the subject of party politics, is basic to the ideological crusade against ideology.



It is strange that in *The Genius of American Politics*, a book on politics, only four pages out of 189 are devoted to a discussion of parties. The reason is definite and important. Usually, parties are the means of conflict and different opinions.

The role of parties in constitutional and democratic government is to find alternatives, important alternatives, to people. As usual, they do not always fulfill their role; usually they often smudge differences. But when they do they fail. And in the time when parties fail the conservative likes them best. Then he attacks on the political party. The political party debates. It puts into question the whole enterprise once again; will there never be a rest? There is no surprise that parties are so disliked. And no surprise they are so important.

Boorstin is anxious because he has proved too much. What a terrible thing it would be if our sense of givenness should vanish. And this seems to be what is happening. He writes that the feeling of givenness has been weakened in America since the end of the nineteenth century. The American people are no longer so impressed with the easy and eternal verities of givenness since they seemed to be of such little value when the real world thrust itself upon people.

As Boorstin puts it, today Americans feel that . . . we are cast in a great role, but for the first time, we begin to wonder if we ourselves may not have some responsibility for composing the plot (Boorstin, 1953: 163). This stunning meaning that American government may have to accept responsibility for its actions, leads the reader to even more important thoughts:

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From the notion that . . . the common experience was enough, Americans moved to the fear that if they did not discover where they were going, they might find themselves going nowhere at all, or even in the wrong direction (Boorstin, 1953: 166).

What, according to Boorstin, is to be done about our weakened feeling of givenness? He offers two possibilities. Americans might answer the demand for a democratic philosophy by making one. This straight approach does not appeal to Boorstin because he has shown that Americans, by their nature, cannot do such a thing; it will be innovation, and innovation.

Moreover, Boorstin indicates, the attempt to think out what Americans would do in the future would create controversy. But it is important to see that the two-party system of the United States is not only here to stay - one might even say it is a tradition - but that given its peculiar traits, its ability to obscure differences of opinion and to shy away from ideas, new or old, it is not a bad weapon for those who prefer to see the end of ideology (Newman 87-89).

As for the business, while this book does not concern itself with the thought of the business world, it can indicate the logic of the relationship between business and conservatism, once we know what the nature of American conservatism is. Business is of course not identical with conservatism, if only because it is not a system of ideology, but a system of profit making. It has its own concerns with which this book is not involved. The businessman plays his existentialist role, if he will forgive the term, as a businessman and nothing more.

But for reasons that range far beyond the simple question of self-interest and economic motivation, he wants to play another role, that of the conservative. There is a split, in other words, between the businessman as a creator of social change, and the businessman as one who wants the rest of society to stand still while he takes command. More precisely, he is a technological innovator who unwittingly and unwillingly creates vast social developments, but who surveys the world he has himself created with the most conservative of feelings.

Thus it will be necessary to give some thought to the nature of business conservatism in America. The chief concern, however, should be with those who have made a consistent political and social theory, who have tried to build a conservative tradition in America. By studying the ideologues of conservatism and history, one may hope to define the nature and structure of America today.

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