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Francis Lieber: History and Political Science Necessary Studies in Free Countries Study Guide

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FRANCIS LIEBER: HISTORY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE NECESSARY STUDIES IN FREE COUNTRIES STUDY GUIDE, 2003

Steven Alan Samson

Introduction

The central themes of Lieber's teaching and scholarly research are combined and shown to greatest advantage in his inaugural address at Columbia College early in 1858. Comprehensive universities for "the moral and intellectual elevation of the whole nation" (331), continued self-education, and "entire countries" are needed to give sufficient scope and amplitude to modern civilization (332). But every institution is also exposed to the twin dangers of centralization and disunion. Lieber opens his address by placing his specific subject – history and political science – into a larger cultural context. He summarizes this context at the end of his address by noting the four main threads in the rich tapestry of western civilization: 1) "Grecian intellectuality," 2) "Christian morality and trans-mundane thought," 3) "Roman law and institutionality," and "Teutonic individual independence, especially as developed in Anglican liberty and self-government."

1. "Every earnest scholar, every faithful student of any branch, is a **catholic lover of all knowledge**." The "one and many theme;" he specialist must also be a generalist. (329)

2. "We stand in need of a **national university**, the highest apparatus of the highest modern civilization." (330)
   a. "[A] university, not national, because established by our national government; that could not well be, and if it were, surely would not be well. . . ." (331)
   b. Example of "that great institution," the University of Berlin: "The universities still remaining in the reduced kingdom were reformed, and a national university was planned, to concentrate the intellectual rays and to send back the intensified light over the land." (331) Role in the Napoleonic wars.

3. Lieber Implies that Self-Government Requires a Balance of Unity and Diversity
   a. Our government is a **federal union**. We loyally adhere to it and turn our faces from centralization, however brilliant, for a time, the lustre of its focus may appear, however imposingly centred power, that saps self-government, may hide for a day the inherent weakness of military concentrated polities." (332)
   b. **Self-government vs. Centralization** "[M]odern civilization stands in need of entire countries," (332-33) *i.e.,* nations or nation-states:
   c. "[E]very government . . is . . . exposed to the danger of gradually increased and, at last, **excessive action of its vital principle**. One-sidedness is a universal effect on man's state of sin. Confederacies are exposed to the danger of sejunction as unitary governments are exposed to absorbing central power – centrifugal power in the one case, centripetal power in the other." (333) [cf. caricatures and extremes in MW, II, 379-80, I, 379-80]
   d. The United States of the Netherlands and the German states as examples of "paralyzing poison of disjunction" or *Separatismus*. [France is later given as an example of the peril of centralization].
   e. Countries as Orchards and Broad Acres of Cultivation: "[T]he *patria* of us moderns ought to consist in a wide land covered by a nation, and not in a city or a little colony. Mankind have outgrown the ancient *city-state*" (333) [Lieber coined this term]
   f. **Political Culture** "Moderns stand in need of nations and national longevity, for their literatures and law, their industry, liberty, and

patriotism; we want countries to work and speak, write and glow for, to live and to die for. . . . Has it ever been sufficiently impressed on our minds how slender the threads are that unite us in a mere political system of states, if we are not tied together by the far stronger cords of those feelings which arise from the consciousness of having a country to cling to and pray for, and unimpeded land and water roads to move on?" (334)

4. A Comprehensive University Would Foster and Promote a Generous Nationality

   a. "All Athens, the choicest city-state of antiquity, may well be said to have been one great university. . . " (334)
   b. Lieber alludes to his fear of disunion

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5. "College education ought to be **substantial and liberal**." (335) It should aim at "storing, strengthening, refining, and awakening the head and heart." [cf. MW, I, 181]

   Objects: 1) the transmission of knowledge for the purposes of practical application and the pursuit of truth, 2) infuse a love of knowledge by leading students from its origins to its heights, 3) convey the method and skill of study, and 4) the cultivation of the mind and the formation of character. Instruction should be within the intellectual reach of the student but also anticipate or quicken further knowledge (336).

6. History and Political Science: Man in His Social Relations

   a. Lieber gives a **Burkean definition of society**: "Society . . . does not only mean a certain number of living individuals bound together by the bonds of common laws, interests, sympathies, and organization, but it means these and the successive generations with which they are interlinked, which have belonged to the same portion of mankind, and whose traditions the living have received. Society is a continuity." Using a Heraclitean simile, he says: "Society is like a river. It is easy to say where the Rhine is, but can you say what it is at any given moment?" (336-37) [See 217
   b. Realism vs. Nominalism and a Covenantal Notion of Property: "While you pronounce the word **America**, some of your fellow-beings breathe their last, and new ones are born into your society. It remains your society. How else could I, in justice, be called upon to obey laws made by lawgivers before I was born [cf. idea of **mortmain**], and who therefore could not, by any theory or construction, represent me individually? [cf. MW, II, 379

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7. History and Statistics

   a. **Social Contract Theory Rejected** "Society is not arbitrarily made up of men, but man is born into society. . . " (337)
   b. "The variety of interests and facts and deeds which history deals with . . . give [sic] to this branch of knowledge a peculiarly cultivating and enlarging character for the mind of the young." (337)
   c. Man is created a social being: 1) protection of parents long after the period of lactation, 2) love of association, 3) all-pervading

principle of mutual dependence, 4) yearning to learn about forebears, love of chronicling and reading chronicles. (337-38)

d. "There is no more nutritious pabulum to rear strong characters than upon history, and all men of action have loved it." (338)

e. "The real science and art of history is the child of periods of action. No puny time has produced great historians." (339)

8. One-Sided Schools of Thought: "The conscientious teacher must guard the young against the blandishment of these schools." (342) "[G]rowth in history however well traced . . . is not on that account alone a genesis with its own internal moral necessity, or does not on that account alone have a prescribing power for a future line of action."

a. **Historical School** They confound is with ought, precedent and fact with right. "[W]hat is new to-day will be fact to-morrow and, according to them, will thus have established its historical right." (339-40) (cf. MW, I, 187, 381)

b. **Philosophical School** "They confound nature and her unchangeable types and unalterable periodicity with the progress and development as well as relapses of associated free agents. In their eyes every series of events and every succession of facts becomes a necessity and a representative of national predestination. . . . It is the school peculiarly in favor with modern, brilliant, and not always unenlightened absolutism; for it strikes individuality from the list of our attributes, and individuality incommodes absolutism. It is the school which strips society of its moral and therefore responsible character. . . ." (340) Idea of manifest destiny. Comparable to the fatalism (Furies) of the early Greeks before they had clearly separated the laws of nature from the moral laws.

c. **Base Theory of Success** "We are told . . . that success proves justice; that the unsuccessful cause proves by the want of success its want of right." (340) "We are not told what length of time constitutes success. . . [N[o great idea, no institution of any magnitude has ever prevailed except after long struggles and repeated unsuccessful attempts." (341)

d. **Theory of Representative Men** A variant of the preceding.

9. "If what I have said about the nourishing character inherent in the study of history is true . . . then it is obvious that in a moral, practical, and intellectual point of view it is the very science for the nascent citizens of a republic." (342, 43)

a. **Despotism** "There are not a few among us who are dazzled by the despotism of a Caesar, appearing brilliant at least at a distance . . . or a misled by the plausible simplicity of democratic absolutism . . . . All absolutism, whether monarchical or democratic, is in principle the same, and the latter always leads by short transitions to the other. We may go further; in all absolutism there is a strong element of communism. The theory of property which Louis the Fourteenth put forth was essentially communistic." (343)

b. **Institutional Liberty** There is no other civil liberty than institutional liberty, all else is but passing semblance and simulation. It is one of our highest duties, therefore, to foster in the young an institutional spirit, and an earnest study of history shows the inestimable value of institutions. . . Institutions, like the sons of

men themselves, may be wicked or good; but it is true that ideas and feelings, however great or pure, retain a passing and meteoric character so long as they are not embodied in vital institutions, and that rights and privileges are but slender reeds so long as they are not protected and kept alive by sound and tenacious institutions; and it is equally true that an institutional spirit is fostered and invigorated by a manly study of society in the days that are gone." (343-44)

c. **Practical Life** "A wise study of the past teaches us social analysis, and the separation of the accidental and superficial, so that it becomes one of the keys by which we learn to understand better the present." (344)

10 "A practical life [such as that of the statesman] is the key with which we unlock the vaults containing the riches of the past." (344)

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11. "Man is always an exchanging being." (345)

12. Three Laws of Civilization

a. **Production** "Man is no finding animal – he must produce." (345)

b. **Commerce** "Men are so constituted that they have far more wants, and can enjoy the satisfying of them more intensely, than other animals; and while these many wants are of a peculiar uniformity among all men, the fitness of the earth is greatly diversified ansd locally restricted, so that men must produce, each more than he wants for himself, and exchange their products." (345)

c. **Progress** "Lastly, the wants of men . . . infinitely increase and are by Providence decreed to increase with advancing civilization; so that man's progress necessitates intenser production and quickened exchange." (346)

13. Economics compared with vaccination; it no longer falls into the faults of the utilitarians.

a. "[P]eriods of national dignity and of the highest endeavors have sometimes been periods of want and poverty. (347-48)

b. Political economy "shows the important truth that mankind at large can become and have become wealthier, and must steadily increase their wealth with expanding culture." (348)

14. What Is Political Economy Good For?

a. "Down to Adam Smith, the greatest statesmanship had always been sought for in the depression of neighboring nations. Even a Bacon considered it self-evident that the enriching of one people implies the impoverishing of another [zero-sum game]. Then came the scotch professor who dared to teach, in his dingy lecture-room [cf. R-H on Luther] at Edinburgh, contrary to the opinion of the whole world, that every man, even were it but for personal reasons, is interested in the prosperity of his neighbors; that his wealth, if it be the result of production and exchange, is not a withdrawal of money from others, and that as with single men so with entire nations – the more prosperous the one so much better for the other. And his teaching, like that of another professor before him – the immortal Grotius – went forth, and rose above men and nations, and statesmen and kings; it ruled their councils and led the history of our race into new channels; it bade men adopt the angel's

greeting: "'Peace on earth and good will towards men," as a maxim of high statesmanship and political shrewdness. Thus rules the mind; thus always science. There is now no intercourse between nations which is not tinctured by Smith and Grotius." (349)

b. Political economy has also provided a "tempering knowledge" to workers about the workings of the market so they don't resort to "blind violence" in face of privation. (350)

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15. The Place of Politics in a Superior Education, especially in America: "Nowhere is political action carried to a greater intensity, and nowhere is the calming effect of an earnest and scientific treatment of politics more necessary."

Further Notes

Individuality (MW, I, 184, 214
Sociality (MW, I, 185, 214, 217

Man in the Enjoyment of His Entire Humanity (MW, I, 210
Practical Characteristics of Man: Different from Constituents of Civilization (MW, I, 209
Christianity (MW, I. 214
Ancient (Monarchical Principle -- everything strictly national) vs. Modern (Commonwealth of Nations, made possible by Christianity and the Broad Universal Character of Modern Knowledge (MW, I, 214)
Constituents of Civilization:

1) Exchange, Commerce, and an Ultimate Peaceful International Communion: Although wants are uniform, the capacity of satisfying them is varied (MW, I, 215). The Law of Mutual Dependence and the Law of the Territorial Division of Labor (MW, I, 216)
2) Individual Property (MW, I, 218