



Seymour M. Lipset

1922–2006

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
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and Ann Swidler*

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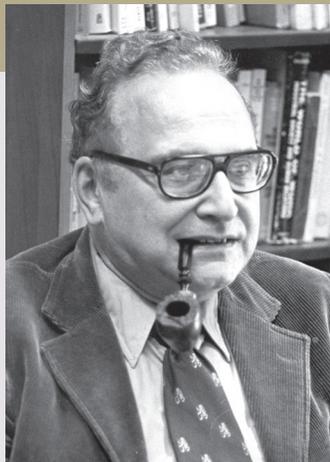
SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

March 18, 1922–December 31, 2006

Elected to the NAS, 1973

Seymour Martin Lipset, one of the giants of sociology in the twentieth century, died on December 31, 2006, in Arlington, Virginia. Lipset shaped modern sociology by writing a string of classic works, nurturing a legion of eminent students, and radiating a kindness that warmed all those around him.

He was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants and grew up immersed in the intense, Marxist debates of his Bronx neighborhood, an atmosphere that he later credited with sparking his intellectual concerns and political commitments. Lipset, along with other memorable student radicals in “Alcove One” at the City College of New York in the 1930s, such as Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Howe, and Philip Selznick, would go on to remake American social science and intellectual life in the middle of the century. He received his PhD from Columbia University under the mentorship of Robert Merton.



S. M. Lipset

By Claude S. Fischer
and Ann Swidler

Lipset’s formal positions—professorships at Toronto, Columbia, Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and George Mason; presidencies of the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Association, the United States Institute of Peace; membership in the National Academy of Sciences; and other roles—hardly describe how influential he was. By one study, Lipset was the most cited social scientist in the world.

Lipset continually generated ideas that defined entire theoretical and research agendas in political sociology, stratification, modernization, and other fields. Much of his work arose from questions about the social bases of democracy and the absence of socialism in America. They led him to study Canada, comparative development, American history, the nature of democratic and anti-democratic politics, the labor movement, social class, and much more.

His dissertation book, *Agrarian Socialism* (1950), was the first in a series which used the American-Canadian comparison to address systematically the “why no socialism in America?” question—that is, why did the United States, presumably the most industrialized nation in the world at the end the nineteenth century, not develop the sort of strong labor movement, working-class politics, and multifaceted welfare state that comparable European nations did? His answer was multifaceted, emphasizing the absence of either a peasantry or an aristocracy in America’s past, the distinctive combination of equality and achievement in America’s values, and even the emigration of Loyalists to Canada during the American Revolution.

Among Lipset’s major contributions to the study of the social conditions for democracy, *Union Democracy* (1956), with Martin Trow and James Coleman, examined why the democratically-run printers’ union managed to escape Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy,” which seemed to rule most unions. That “law” stated that organizations, whatever their ideological origin, will develop authoritarian, self-renewing elites. The printer’s union (which, not incidentally, Lipset’s father had been a member of) was a noticeable exception. Through intensive, multi-method team research, the authors discovered the importance of small, mediating groups—what would later be labeled “civil society”—for democracy. Lipset and colleagues also provided a compelling argument that “deviant case analyses” such as this one could reveal causal processes that would otherwise be missed in the sameness of the common cases. *Union Democracy* alone would be the crowning achievement of most academic careers.

Lipset’s most widely read book, *Political Man* (1960), set the groundwork for decades of research in both sociology and political science. In the collected essays, Lipset pressed the case for what has now perhaps become commonplace thinking: that liberal democratic politics are made possible only in particular social and economic conditions. (His work here and in *The First New Nation*, discussed below, stimulated a surge of interest in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville.)

Two of Lipset’s most influential articles, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy” (1959) and, with Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments” (1967), illustrate the complexity and range of his thinking. Lipset begins with the correlation of stable democracy with wealth, industrialization, and education. But he adds important refinements. For example, the survival in some nations of traditional symbols like monarchies curbed reaction from the conservative classes. He also shows that when major cleavages attendant on modernization, such as between religion and

secularism or between capital and labor, came in stages rather than all together, the timing enabled emerging democratic institutions to gain legitimacy by resolving each crisis in sequence. Both essays, like so much of Lipset's oeuvre, bear rereading; they are much more nuanced and interesting than the boiled-down versions most sociologists encounter today, and their arguments remain relevant.

With his colleague at Berkeley, Reinhard Bendix, Lipset produced *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (1959) and the canonical edited collection, *Class, Status, and Power* (1965), works that brought cross-national and historical comparison to the emerging field of stratification research. Before the flood of statistical work in the field, these books raised the questions that stimulated and still drive such studies, among them: How open to upward mobility is the United States, particularly in comparison to western Europe? How mutually reinforcing are the different structures of inequality? What are the political and personal consequences of movement up the ladder?

In *The First New Nation* (1963), an important work for historians as well as sociologists, Lipset further developed his ideas about what made America different, focusing on cultural and institutional patterns set at the country's founding. It is a classic modern study of "American exceptionalism" properly defined—not as a "superior" society, but as one distinctively different from other western nations in multiple dimensions, such as moralism and religiosity, as well as the weakness of its working-class. In a piece of historical analysis, Lipset rooted his explanations in the circumstances of the nation's revolutionary birth (a contrast, again, to Canada). He continued exploring ideas and data on the question through *American Exceptionalism* (1996) and, with Gary Marks, in *It [Socialism] Didn't Happen Here* (2001).

Lipset was a major intellectual force and often a foundational figure in other fields, as well, such as the study of higher education, the politics of academics and intellectuals (e.g., *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics*, 1975), Latin American development, and American Jewry (e.g., with Earl Raab, *Jews and the New American Scene*, 1995). He wrote prolifically, not to bolster his reputation or to press a theoretical claim, but to contribute ideas and findings to the vital intellectual debates of his time. He paid serious attention to evidence, often using an eclectic mix of data and theory and whatever kind of evidence would work empirically, be it survey data or historical accounts. For example, observing that social mobility was no greater in the United States than in Europe convinced him that America's exceptionalism was due to its distinctive historical experiences and the values they shaped, rather than its unique social structure. Ross

Perot's 1992 third-party presidential bid made him realize that he had overestimated the influence of America's electoral system in inhibiting socialism; the United States could have successful third parties, but not social-democratic, labor, or socialist ones.

Lipset's short memoir, in the 1996 *Annual Review of Sociology*, gives a rich account of the influences on his intellectual development and scholarly pursuits, starting with his father's experiences during the Russian Revolution, through the Great Depression, his exposure to western Canadian politics during World War II (he flunked the military service vision test), and his colleagues at Columbia, Berkeley, Harvard, and Stanford.

Lipset's achievements, of course, garnered him the sorts of honorifics one would expect: presidencies of associations; awards across his many fields, such as public opinion research, Jewish studies, Canadian studies, and comparative politics; and election to, in addition to the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

As a teacher, Lipset worked with and sponsored a diverse range of eminent students, including James Coleman, Maurice Zeitlin, Gary T. Marx, Gary Marks, Immanuel Wallerstein, Bill Schneider, Juan Linz, Theda Skocpol, Larry Diamond, and many, many others.

He was overflowing with ideas and fascinated by all sorts of information. Having overcome dyslexia, he also became a speed reader and could be spotted in Harvard's William James Hall, walking from his office to the men's room and back, flipping through the pages of a book, having digested much of it by the time he returned to his office. Enthusiastically, Lipset shared what he learned with all comers, from eminent scholars to graduate students.

More than just a scholar of democracy, Lipset was an active participant, taking on roles as varied as co-chair of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, scholar at Progressive Policy Institute, and president of the American Professors for Peace in the Middle East.

None of the accolades and honors that Lipset received over the years or since his death capture what those who knew him recognized as most important of all: Marty was a wonderful person. He had a fulfilling personal life. He married the former Elsie Braun, with whom he had three children—David, Daniel, and Cici—and six grandchildren. Elsie, who helped Marty remain the same boy from the Bronx rooted in his Jewish tradition, died in 1987. In 1990 he married the former Sydnee Guyer and embarked on

a second happy marriage. Together with Sydnee, he continued to be active in the Jewish community and in Democratic Party politics.

Lipset was, in every respect, a *mensch*—a decent, honorable person. He was also always down-to-earth, warm, unpretentious, artless, garrulously friendly, and for one of such accomplishment, remarkably modest. He was, as his wife Sydnee has said, just “a very sweet man.” Person after person told her that it was thanks to him that they finished their dissertations, got their books published, landed jobs, or gained tenure. Theda Skocpol—also a past president of both the American Sociological and American Political Science Association—has pointed out that Marty treated women with professional respect and supported them even before the women’s movement. Others have noted that, despite controversy about his role during Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement (Marty was an advocate of debate rather than direct action), he generously mentored students of all political stripes. Physically large, Marty Lipset was even larger in spirit.

He is still, ten years on, tremendously missed.

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