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Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography

DANIEL JOSEPH SINGAL

PLACING RICHARD HOFSTADTER IN THE CONTEXT of American historiography has been a difficult task for several years. At first everyone appeared to agree with the assessment in John Higham's famous essay of 1959, which defined the consensus school and included Hofstadter among its members. Following Higham's lead, most writers at the time almost axiomatically linked Hofstadter with Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, Clinton Rossiter, and others who have celebrated the supposed absence of ideological politics in America. The basis for this judgment was *The American Political Tradition*, a book Hofstadter published in 1948 at the beginning of his career. As he observed in the introduction, his "studies in the ideology of American statesmanship" had convinced him "of the need for a reinterpretation of our political traditions which emphasized the common climate of American opinion." "However much at odds on specific issues," he continued, "the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man." The break with the Progressive school, with its emphasis on a fierce endemic struggle between rich and poor, capitalist and democrat, could not seem more clear.¹

Yet a number of recent writers on Hofstadter have been troubled by the consensus label. In 1969 Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., raised the first doubts about it, and Christopher Lasch, Richard Gillam, Daniel Walker Howe, Peter Elliott Finn, Stanley Elkins, and Eric L. McKittrick have all followed suit. Hofstadter may have acknowledged the existence of a bourgeois capitalist consensus in America,

I am grateful to Alan Brinkley, James L. Crouthamel, Carol V. R. George, John Higham, Beatrice K. Hofstadter, Robert A. Huff, Richard Latner, Eric L. McKittrick, Michael O'Brien, and Leo P. Ribuffo for their helpful suggestions and criticisms. I am also indebted to Hobart and William Smith Colleges for providing a special term of leave during which this essay was written, and to the late Richard Reinitz, whose splendid innovation of teaching historiography in place of a survey as the introductory course in American history supplied me with an ideal setting for developing my ideas.

¹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948; New York, 1974), xxxvi-xxxvii; John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, 27 (1959): 94-95; Bernard Sternsher, *Consensus, Conflict, and American Historians* (Bloomington, Ind., 1975), 9-12, 71-74; Richard Reinitz, *Irony and Consciousness: American Historiography and Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1980), 147, 204 n.; Charles Forcey, "Richard Hofstadter: Consensus in Conflict," paper presented at the Seventy-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, held in Detroit, April 1-4, 1981; and J. R. Pole, *Paths to the American Past* (New York, 1979), 265-66, 268, 300-01.

Schlesinger maintained, but he “perceived the consensus from a radical perspective, from the outside, and deplored it.” Consensus history, as Higham’s article described it, reflected the pervasive social and cultural conservatism of the 1950s; its works revealed “a placid, unexciting past” in which America appeared “a happy land, adventurous in manner but conservative in substance, and—above all—remarkably homogeneous.” Although Higham himself later amended this definition to take account of the considerable variations and disagreements within the school, the dominant image of consensus writing continues to center on an admiring portrayal of a nation enjoying broad agreement on its basic ideological principles and hence unusual political and social stability. But surely little of this image held true for Hofstadter, especially in *The American Political Tradition*. Gillam stated the case succinctly, “At times lambasted as ‘consensus’ or ‘counterprogressive’ history, the book is in fact acutely critical in tone—an exposé—and retains certain categories of Progressive-Marxist scholarship.” Perhaps nothing captures better Hofstadter’s distance from the celebratory intellectual temper of the 1950s than the sign he kept posted above his desk. It read “Hofstadter’s Indomitable Skepticism.”²

Hofstadter’s ambiguous relationship to consensus history is only one of several important questions about his work that remain unresolved. It is likely, for example, that Howe and Finn expressed a widespread opinion when they claimed that Hofstadter “was probably the most prominent member of a distinguished generation of American historians” and an archetypal intellectual of his times. Nonetheless, few could say with certainty what his influence has been either on his craft or on American intellectual life as a whole. Most important, no one has really examined his career to see exactly how it developed. Was there a significant shift in his thought or approach during the three decades that he was active as an interpreter of the American past, and, if so, what can that shift tell us about his historiographic role? When examined from this perspective, Hofstadter’s work appears only marginally related to the debate over conflict versus consensus. Ironically, the consensus label fits him least well early in his career, when he was most commonly regarded as a consensus writer, but with a fair degree of accuracy in the 1960s, when he himself was trying quietly to refute it.³

To understand Hofstadter’s real significance, it is far more useful to focus on his

² Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., “Richard Hofstadter,” in Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, eds., *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians* (New York, 1969), 289–92; Higham, “Cult of ‘Consensus,’” 93–95; Richard Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and ‘The Critical Ideal,’” *American Scholar*, 47 (1977–78): 76–77; Christopher Lasch, “Foreword,” in Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xiv, xxiii; Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn, “Richard Hofstadter: The Ironies of an American Historian,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 43 (1974): 2–3; Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKittrick, “Richard Hofstadter: A Progress” in Elkins and McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York, 1974), 310; Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, Ill., 1973), 241–43, 344–46; John Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), 144–45, and *History: Humanistic Scholarship in America* (1965; Baltimore, 1983), 214, 221, 225. Higham also revised his earlier estimate of Hofstadter as a consensus writer, taking note of Hofstadter’s critical intent and tragic vision of the American past; *History: Humanistic Scholarship in America*, 213, 228.

³ Howe and Finn, “Richard Hofstadter,” 1, 16. Hofstadter never explicitly repudiated the consensus label, but he did make clear his discomfort with it. Writing in 1967, he noted that the designation “has been very awkward for me, in the sense that it has linked me with other historians with whom I have significant differences, and because I have some serious misgivings of my own about what is known as consensus history.” In essence, he thought the consensus approach a useful, though distinctly temporary, corrective to the excesses

lifelong quest to comprehend the relationship between politics and ideas in America—or, as he referred to it, the study of “political culture.” “Call me a political historian mainly interested in the role of ideas in politics, an historian of political culture rather than of parties or institutions,” he told an interviewer in 1960. He began this quest with an assumption, derived from both Progressivism and Marxism, that political behavior was invariably rational, that people acted politically in accordance with their interests, and that political leaders served to articulate those interests in coherent ideologies. Before long that assumption lay in shambles, and the rhetoric of political leaders appeared to him a case of crass opportunism at best or of hopeless irrationality at worst. The balance of his career centered on his persistent attempt to find an explanatory scheme that would enable him to make rational sense of seemingly irrational behavior. Through a growing appreciation of the symbolic uses of politics and the adoption of pluralist theory, he gradually arrived at a conception of American political culture that not only satisfied his intellectual needs but also served as an invaluable stepping-stone for the generation of historians that came after him.⁴

In a more general sense Hofstadter stands out as an excellent example of a mid-twentieth-century modernist intellectual. Modernist thought and culture began its ascendancy among American thinkers around the turn of the century through a process of rebellion against the fundamental dualism of Victorianism, which insisted on a clear division between the human and the animal, the rational and the irrational, the moral and the immoral. Modernists believed that reality is much too complex to be comprehended by such a bipolar model, that human beings cannot be understood without exploring their irrational and often animalistic impulses, and that all knowledge of the world and all moral judgments must necessarily be tentative and relativistic. The Progressive writers who nurtured Hofstadter took the initial steps toward a break with the Victorian sensibility but still retained its basic moral dichotomy as the organizing principle of their work. That dualistic mode of thought in turn became Hofstadter’s chief complaint against the Progressives, along with their alleged tendency to oversimplify issues and their excessive rationalism. For him, the test of good history—and, more broadly, of good thought—was a willingness to grapple with complexity, above all with the vast complexity of the human psyche. Accordingly he spent his career absorbing relevant modernist insights from a number of allied fields, especially literary studies, psychology, sociology, and political science, and demonstrating how they could illuminate the study of American history. In this way, too, he made a vital contribution to American historiography. By tracing Hofstadter’s development, then, we may not only comprehend his true historiographic status but also gain valuable clues for discerning the nature of American historical writing in our own day.⁵

of Progressive historiography. See Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxviii–xxix, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 444 n. , 444–45, and “Communication,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15 (1954): 328.

⁴ David Hawke, “Interview: Richard Hofstadter,” *History*, 3 (New York, 1960): 135; and Hofstadter, “History and the Social Sciences,” in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York, 1956), 361.

⁵ For a description of modernist culture, see Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 4–8, 261–62. Of the Progressive historians

WHATEVER ELSE MAY BE SAID of Hofstadter's early years, it is apparent that they made him keenly aware of both ethnic diversity and the fragile nature of human existence. Born in 1916 in Buffalo, New York, to a Polish Jewish father and a mother of Lutheran extraction, he was reared as an Episcopalian, though it was his Jewish heritage with which he later identified to the extent that he preserved any ethnic consciousness at all. Emil A. Hofstadter, who had emigrated from Cracow as a young boy, ardently pursued assimilation and middle-class respectability, manifesting precisely the cast of mind that his son came to describe as the American consensus. The family's fortunes, however, took a tragic turn when Hofstadter was ten; his mother, Katherine Hill Hofstadter, suddenly died. It was the first of several such tragedies that stalked his life and served to make him wary of the optimistic bourgeois world view his father espoused.⁶

After serving as president of his high school graduating class—the only political office he ever held—Hofstadter remained in his native city to take an undergraduate degree in 1937 at the University of Buffalo, majoring in philosophy and history. There he came under two contradictory influences: the work of Charles A. Beard, with its thoroughgoing materialism, and the example of his mentor at Buffalo, the diplomatic historian Julius W. Pratt, who challenged the Progressive reliance on economic causation in explaining American foreign policy. The tension between these two approaches was evident in Hofstadter's senior thesis, which vigorously attacked Beard's notion that the Civil War represented a "Second American Revolution" launched by Northern capitalists to achieve control of the federal government. By examining the tariff and homestead issues, Hofstadter found that, with the exception of the iron and steel makers, "the majority of capitalists . . . opposed the Republicans" in 1860. But, he quickly added, their opposition was "based upon economic reasons," in particular the calculation that they would profit more from free trade than from protection. Thus, Hofstadter, although he had already begun his assault on Beard, clung to the Progressive notion that politics could be explained primarily in terms of rational self-interest.⁷

Anxious to participate in the intellectual and political ferment of the 1930s,

Hofstadter wrote, "Their conception of political man was at bottom—even though they may not always have been prepared to defend it—highly rationalistic. . . . In politics he sought to realize his interests, of which he had a fairly clear and basically accurate conception, and which he saw and defined almost exclusively in economic terms." "Today," he continued, "under the impact of a more informed sense of the considerations that enter into human action, the simple synthesis offered by the progressive historians is breaking down. Historians are replacing their economic man with a creature who is prey to a variety of motives and concerns." Hofstadter, "History and Sociology in the United States," in Seymour Martin Lipset and Richard Hofstadter, eds., *Sociology and History: Methods* (New York, 1968), 17. Also see Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 442–44, 463.

⁶ Paula S. Fass, "Richard Hofstadter," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 17 (Detroit, 1983): 211, 213; and Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York, 1978), 14–15.

⁷ Hofstadter, "Academic Vitae," n.d., and "The Tariff and Homestead Issues in the Republican Campaign of 1860" (senior tutorial thesis, University of Buffalo, 1936), ii–iv, 32, Columbia University Library, New York City, Richard Hofstadter Papers [hereafter, Hofstadter Papers], box 19; Fass, "Richard Hofstadter," 213; and Hawke, "Interview," 140–41. Hofstadter later condensed his undergraduate thesis and noticeably softened the critique of Beard. See his "The Tariff Issue on the Eve of the Civil War," *AHR*, 44 (1938–39): 50–55. Compare the argument of Julius W. Pratt on late nineteenth-century imperialism: "Controvert as it may current fashions in historical interpretation, the observation must be made that the rise of an expansionist philosophy in the United States owed little to economic influences. . . . The need of American business for colonial markets and fields of investment was discovered not by business men but by historians and other intellectuals, by journalists and politicians." Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore, 1936), 22.

Hofstadter moved in the fall of 1937 to New York City. On his father's insistence he initially enrolled in the Columbia University law school. In the spring, however, he switched to the graduate school in history at Columbia, from which he earned the master's degree in 1938 and doctorate in 1942. Arriving, Alfred Kazin recalled, as "the all-American blond collegian with crew cut just in from Buffalo," Hofstadter soon found himself swept up in the ongoing political wars of the Left. Whether he officially joined the Communist party is unclear, but it is certain that, under the influence of his first wife, Felice Swados, he did attend some party meetings and become involved with the Communist-leaning National Maritime Union in Brooklyn. Sailors and other proletarian harbingers of revolution descended on the Hofstadter household for free meals and political talk. His own political development, however, paralleled that of the circle of highly talented young writers affiliated with the Trotskyist *Partisan Review*, a group that had broken with the Communist party and Stalinism by 1937 and became in time the nucleus of the postwar New York intelligentsia. Hofstadter was connected to this group through Kazin, his graduate school friend, and, while remaining characteristically on the periphery, he ultimately drew from its ranks some of his most important personal and professional associations.⁸

Although increasingly disillusioned with Russia, the *Partisan* writers in the late 1930s still held to the "scientific" side of Marxism, which maintained that history could be construed in a rational, comprehensive pattern if only the proper framework was applied. Most of all, the *Partisan* coterie possessed a deep-rooted belief in what Terry A. Cooney and others have identified as "cosmopolitanism." Its objectives, according to Cooney, included "the conquest of crippling parochialisms, the attainment of intellectual sophistication, [and] the triumph of secularism and rationalism." In fact, with its stress on diversity, relativism, change, and complexity and its sharp opposition to traditional Victorian ideals of homogeneity, stability, and moral innocence, cosmopolitanism should properly be seen as an urban variant of modernism. Where cosmopolitan thinkers differed from other modernists was in the tendency to connect their dearest values with city life, while locating the source of the culture they detested in the countryside. To them, small-town America constituted a hotbed of bigotry, political reaction, and anti-intellectualism; populism, both at home and abroad, Cooney told us, was already linked in their minds with incipient fascism. In the early 1930s, they had assumed that international communism would be the vehicle of the cosmopolitan future, but, as the decade wore on and especially as news of the purge of party intellectuals during the Moscow trials seeped in, their disenchantment grew. By 1938 most had reinvested

⁸ Alfred Kazin, "Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," *American Scholar*, 40 (1971): 397, 400; Beatrice K. Hofstadter to the author, March 13, March 29, 1983; Fass, "Richard Hofstadter," 213-14; Gillam, "Richard Hofstadter," 71, 74; Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston, 1965), 101-06; Lasch, "Foreword," xii; and James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York, 1968), 164-68, 185-87. M. Laurent Cesari, who is currently completing a doctoral dissertation on Hofstadter at the University of Paris, claims to have uncovered substantial evidence that Hofstadter was indeed a member of the Communist party, that he joined a cell at Columbia in 1937 well after the first news of the purge trials reached America, and that he remained in the organization until the Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced in late 1939 (though he had left in all but name by February of that year). If Cesari is correct, this evidence would not only fortify the analysis of Hofstadter's political development presented here but also help explain many things about his later career, especially his intense but cautious response to McCarthyism in the 1950s. Cesari to the author, September 29, December 7, 1983.

their faith in a professional urban intelligentsia, composed of people like themselves. This new intellectual class—detached from all provincial concerns and prejudices, devoted almost religiously to its calling, and committed to a ruthless social criticism—represented the only hope they saw of activating cosmopolitan values.⁹

Given his urban background and ethnic origins, Hofstadter was bound to find this style of thought appealing. Like most members of the *Partisan* circle, moreover, he was as much a child of the 1920s as of the 1930s—his earliest intellectual heroes had been writers like H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis who initiated that decade's "revolt against the village." For Hofstadter and the others, the fierce conflict that Mencken depicted between an older, individualistic, agrarian America given to fundamentalism and prohibition and a new, urban, polyglot nation that was secular and tolerant blended easily with Depression-era Marxism to help produce the cosmopolitan mentality. Hofstadter also shared the group's scorn for the New Deal. Compared to Marxist theory, New Deal liberalism seemed unsophisticated and lacking in coherent plan; furthermore, its parochial appeals to ethnic and regional constituencies were highly repellent. Hofstadter liked to amuse his friends with skillful and caustic parodies of, in Kazin's words, "our favorite non-hero, F. D. R." On a more serious level, Hofstadter's master's thesis at Columbia documented the misery visited on Southern sharecroppers by New Deal policies.¹⁰

To describe the young Hofstadter as a passionate revolutionary would be wrong; to underestimate the intensity of his Marxist conviction or the degree of his eventual disillusionment would be no less mistaken. The conceptual framework to which he subscribed in the 1930s divided the world clearly and predictably between those countries representing the reactionary past and those belonging to the socialist future. But that framework soon began to crumble under the impact of unexpected events, starting with the Popular Front in France and continuing through the Spanish Civil War and Moscow trials. For Hofstadter, the worst shock came with the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. The pact, he later commented, paraphrasing Lenin, "threw me off the great locomotive of history, and onto the dustbin of history." National leaders, he had believed, acted in rough consonance with their ideologies, and their ideologies in turn reflected class interests. Now the far Right and far Left appeared to be joining forces in what seemed to him a politically senseless union. Those like himself on the Left, he reported in 1940, were trapped in a "pall of frustration" and could no longer find their way. The attempt to make "scientific" sense of political reality was dead. In many respects, Hofstadter's subsequent career as a historian was devoted to the effort to achieve an alternative understanding of political reality in the wake of this perceived disaster.¹¹

⁹ Terry A. Cooney, "Cosmopolitan Values and the Identification of Reaction: *Partisan Review* in the 1930s," *Journal of American History*, 68 (1981–82): 582–84, 587, 592–93, 597; David A. Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975): 135–36, 145–46; and Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, 1973), 336–37.

¹⁰ Kazin, *New York Jew*, 15–16; Hawke, "Interview," 140; Pells, *Radical Visions*, 83–84; and Hofstadter, "The Southeastern Cotton Tenants Under the AAA, 1933–1935" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1938).

¹¹ Hofstadter, remarks at a special meeting with his graduate students, New York City, September 1968; Hofstadter, review of Max Lerner's *Ideas Are Weapons*, in *Political Science Quarterly*, 55 (1940): 621; and Pells,

HOFSTADTER'S STARTING POINT IN THAT QUEST was his doctoral dissertation, published in 1944 as *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915*. A straightforward and craftsmanlike work of intellectual history for the most part, it also afforded Hofstadter the chance to reconnoiter his enemy, the conservative ideology of individualism and laissez-faire. The book is a narrative of progress and reform, which begins with the philosophical system of Herbert Spencer and proceeds to Spencer's chief American disciples, to his initial critics, and, finally, to the rise of what Hofstadter called a "new collectivism" in thinkers like Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey. Hofstadter's own allegiance clearly lay with that "new collectivism" and its vision of a cohesive society and active state guided by rational thought. Dewey in particular received praise as a writer with a keen social consciousness who "preached the effectiveness of intelligence as an instrument in modifying the world." This aspect of socialist thought had the greatest appeal for Hofstadter, and it remained his ideal even after his disillusionment with Marxism was complete.¹²

But could "intelligence" ever become an effective instrument for shaping American society? Could intellectuals look forward someday soon to navigating the ship of state? Hofstadter's findings were not encouraging. The uses made of Darwinian theory during the Gilded Age suggested that "social ideas," when they enter the political arena, soon lose their integrity. Rather, they rapidly become the property of the dominant class. According to Hofstadter, "In determining whether such ideas are accepted, truth and logic are less important criteria than suitability to the intellectual needs and preconceptions of social interests. This is one of the great difficulties that must be faced by rational strategists of social change." If the prognosis for social planning looked poor, the concept of class conflict, at least, appeared to offer a rational strategy for undertaking political analysis. But this holds true, Hofstadter soon discovered, only when writing about intellectuals who generally mean what they say. On turning to mainstream politicians in his next book, he found that they were very different indeed.¹³

The years following the publication of *Social Darwinism in American Thought* were both difficult and crucial for Hofstadter. Felice Swados died in August 1945, less than two years after the birth of their first child. "It is certainly not too much to suggest," wrote Paula S. Fass, "that his young wife's death, itself an echo of the earlier loss of his mother, underwrote the profound sense of humility Hofstadter brought to his analysis of human experience and historical knowledge." But along with the humility, one suspects, came an understandable element of bitterness discernible in the iconoclastic tone that entered his writing at this time. In the wake of this tragedy, Hofstadter moved steadily to rebuild his life. In 1946 he left his initial teaching post at the University of Maryland to become assistant professor of history at Columbia, where he remained for the rest of his career. In January 1947 he married Beatrice Kevitt and established the close-knit family existence that

Radical Visions, 347. I was present during the special meeting, called to discuss the violent events that had closed down Columbia University the previous spring, when Hofstadter recounted his own political activities during the 1930s and his subsequent disillusionment. In an interview a few years later he again emphasized his early radicalism; see "The Age of Rubbish," *Newsweek*, July 6, 1970, p. 22.

¹² Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (1944; Boston, 1955), 167–69, 134–36; and Elkins and McKittrick, "Hofstadter: A Progress," 303–04.

¹³ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 201, 203–04.

proved an essential source of support in the years ahead. The award of an Alfred A. Knopf fellowship began his long and mutually advantageous association with that prestigious publishing house. And, finally, during these years he wrote *The American Political Tradition*, an authentic masterpiece that secured his professional reputation once and for all.¹⁴

In addition to its pathbreaking qualities, *The American Political Tradition* is one of the most jaundiced views of American political history ever written by a major scholar. That it sold so well for so long (over one million copies) and was adopted as a textbook by thousands of colleges and high schools throughout the country is surely an irony. For in it Hofstadter examined American political leadership from the Founding Fathers to Franklin D. Roosevelt and found in the main a record of unremitting opportunism. The only consistent social goal these men shared, he contended, was to bolster bourgeois capitalism—to allow the middle classes to gorge themselves at the trough. On this one point there was a consensus. Those political conflicts that did occur, he told us, were essentially charades, since no significant beliefs or issues were at stake. But again, Hofstadter found this consensus only to condemn it in the most acid terms. Certainly the widespread acceptance of “the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man” was not for him a mark of American superiority.¹⁵

Nor did he deal kindly with the idols of early American politics. He saw the Founding Fathers much as Beard did, as economic realists trying to protect their financial interests from the depredations of “aggressive dirt farmers” and “the propertyless masses of the towns.” Their antidemocratic sentiments, he explained, led to a constitution mainly designed to protect individual property rights—a document that had become largely anachronistic and oppressive by the twentieth century. Thomas Jefferson is likewise depicted as a patronizing aristocrat rather than as a real man of the people. A “pragmatic” politician who abhorred conflict, Jefferson, Hofstadter complained, “had not the temperament of an agitator, hardly even of a leader in the qualities that leadership requires under modern democracy.” Most of all, Hofstadter could not forgive Jefferson his absorption in partisan politics. “If he had been the crusading democrat of Jeffersonian legend he could not have been so successful a machine leader.” Neither did Andrew Jackson possess guiding principles that Hofstadter could detect, except political expediency and a violent temper. A fundamentally ambitious man who hitched his star to a constituency hungering for economic mobility, Jackson, in Hofstadter’s estimate, did what was politically advantageous at each juncture; no rational economic purpose whatever was to be found in his bank war.¹⁶

The ultimate in opportunism did not come until the twentieth century. Although

¹⁴ Fass, “Richard Hofstadter,” 215. With his firm ties to his family, university, publisher, and urban locale, it is striking how rooted Hofstadter became for a supposedly rootless modern intellectual. I suspect that this secure personal and professional life was essential in enabling him to sustain his critical stance toward American society.

¹⁵ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxxvi–xxxvii; Schlesinger, “Richard Hofstadter,” 289–90; Lasch, “Foreword,” xiv; Reinitz, *Irony and Consciousness*, 132; and Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter,” 76–77. Prior to the book’s publication, Hofstadter believed he was writing for an audience midway between a scholarly and a popular one, “a relatively small one, I suppose.” Hofstadter to Howard K. Beale, February 11, 1948, Hofstadter Papers.

¹⁶ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 4–5, 14–16, 20–21, 26, 31–32, 45, 61, 69–70, 74–78.



Figure 1: Richard Hofstadter, 1916–70.
Photograph reproduced courtesy of Beatrice K. Hofstadter, New York, N.Y.

Hofstadter insisted privately to Howard K. Beale that he admired Theodore Roosevelt, the TR found in *The American Political Tradition* seems a virtual maniac capable of striking at anything in sight. His trust-busting campaign was nothing but rhetoric. “There was a hundred times more noise than accomplishment.” Why, then, did Roosevelt lash out so vigorously at the trusts? He had learned, Hofstadter asserted, that an ambitious politician must control his temper, and thus his “penchant for violence . . . had to be discharged on a purely verbal level.” This explained Roosevelt’s apparent advocacy of a reform position in the Northern

Securities case, among others. "Such equivocations are the life of practical politics," Hofstadter wrote disparagingly, "but while they often sound weak and halting in the mouths of the ordinary politician, Roosevelt had a way of giving them a fine aggressive surge." His main historical function, it follows, had been to comfort anxious members of the middle class in an age of unparalleled corporate growth. "With his uncanny instinct for impalpable falsehoods he articulated their fears in a string of plausible superficialities." So much for the hero of the Progressive generation.¹⁷

Hofstadter was more ambivalent toward the second Roosevelt. Although he titled the chapter "Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Patrician as Opportunist," he granted for the first time that opportunism in the hands of a master politician might have its merits. To be sure, FDR was "neither systematic nor consistent" in his philosophy; he "provided no clearly articulated break with the inherited faith." But he did adopt a flexible and kindhearted approach to the nation's problems, along with "a kind of intuitive wisdom" for knowing what the people really wanted. His program was "politically, if not economically, coherent." Still, Hofstadter could not overcome the deep disdain he and his friends had felt during the 1930s at Roosevelt's failure to approach issues with a requisite sense of their complexity. As Kazin recalled, "We were obsessed by Roosevelt, he was so much the wily slippery confidence man unable for very long to satisfy 'people of principle.' But his real fault was that we did not know where his bantering elusive sense of superiority came from, what he had done to deserve so much power. . . . Roosevelt, the aristo-politician, forever mischievous, condescending, knew how to say 'my old friend' in eleven languages. He reduced everything into one-sentence paragraphs, and with this seductive simplicity was in touch with millions." How could a man so lacking in bona fide intellectuality, so simplistic in his habits of mind, become the nation's leader at such a desperate moment in history? That was the question that rankled Hofstadter. In this respect, *The American Political Tradition* can be seen as an extended critique of the New Deal read backwards into American history.¹⁸

By contrast, the one favorable portrait in the book, that of the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, reveals the sort of political leader Hofstadter tended to admire. Clearly Phillips was not an opportunist; rather, he possessed and acted on "a reasoned philosophy of agitation." His career reflected what Hofstadter saw as the special role of the agitator in history. Unlike the conventional pragmatic politician, the agitator deliberately concerns himself with the ultimate possibilities in any historical situation. Although such a person may appear utopian and foolish most

¹⁷ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 270, 272–78, 293–96, 298; and Hofstadter to Howard K. Beale, February 11, 1948, Hofstadter Papers. It seems likely that TR became such a special object of Hofstadter's attention because, as Hofstadter once put it, Roosevelt was "one of the very few American presidents since the day of John Quincy Adams who had any pretensions to being an intellectual or a cultural force." The temptation for debunking must have been overwhelming. See Hofstadter, "The Rough Rider," *Commentary*, 12 (1951): 196.

¹⁸ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxxvi, 411–13, 421–22, 427; and Kazin, *New York Jew*, 15–16. Hofstadter's indictment of FDR was especially strong in the area of foreign policy. Comparing Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson, he wrote that it was "hard to imagine Roosevelt . . . straining as desperately at Yalta or Teheran as Wilson did at Paris for detailed factual understanding, for intellectual consistency and moral responsibility"; *American Political Tradition*, 458.

of the time, events will catch up to him. When the inevitable social crisis occurs, "the logical and doctrinaire mind of the agitator become[s] at one with the realities, and he appears overnight to the people a plausible and forceful thinker." At last the alienated, radical intellectual, in other words, becomes effective in the democratic arena, and the people respond to his logic rather than to the usual empty rhetoric. To Hofstadter in 1948, such moments of crisis held far more appeal than the sorry spectacle of "normal" American politics.¹⁹

Compared to Hofstadter's later works, *The American Political Tradition* is especially striking in its almost total obliviousness toward the symbolic uses of politics. His analysis of Jackson's attack on the Bank of the United States, for example, proceeds primarily in terms of legal and economic considerations. There is no clear recognition that Old Hickory's actions may have reverberated through the nation's political structure and helped shape a new constituency for the Democratic party. More broadly, the book lacks any systematic conception of the function of political parties—a subject of intense interest to Hofstadter by the 1960s. Indeed, far from praising the two-party system, Hofstadter at this time registered his grave doubts about its role in a democracy. "The best defense of the two-party system is the argument that while it permits the majority to govern, as it should, it also centralizes the opposition in a single minority group, thus preventing the dissipation of minority energy in sectarian disputes and checking any tyrannical tendencies on the part of the 'ins.' This argument has seldom fitted the facts of American life, where party differences have rarely been profound and party structure has been so rigid that minorities, instead of being focused in either major party when it was out, have rather had to sunder their traditional party ties and—in most cases—drown in the political seas." Nothing could contrast more sharply with what he wrote some twenty years later in *The Idea of a Party System*—the result of his long quest to find a new understanding of American political culture.²⁰

AFTER HOFSTADTER published *The American Political Tradition*, he engaged in extensive interdisciplinary reading, especially in the fields of political sociology, social psychology, psychoanalytic theory, and literary criticism. Three Columbia colleagues proved especially influential at this juncture: Lionel Trilling, whose symbolic interpretations of literary texts suggested a similar approach to political rhetoric; C. Wright Mills, who in *White Collar* (1951) detailed the status anxieties and aspirations of the new corporate middle class; and Robert K. Merton, whose sociological concept of "latent function" permitted an analyst to construe in rational terms behavior that at first sight appears highly irrational. As Elkins and McKittrick pointed out, one of the "most arresting" examples of latent function that Merton cited was the urban political machine; on one level it seemed shamelessly to exploit its constituents, while on another it in fact rendered them important social and cultural services. In addition, Hofstadter rapidly assimilated the basic premises of

¹⁹ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 176–79, 183–84.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76–78, 80–81, 231. On Hofstadter's estimate of political parties at this time, see his "From Calhoun to the Dixiecrats," *Social Research*, 16 (1949): 149.

psychoanalytic thought, both directly through the works of Freud, and indirectly through such writers as Harold Lasswell, John Dollard, and David Riesman. Always insistent that the historian must never overtly psychoanalyze his subjects, Hofstadter made abundant indirect use of Freudian insights in comprehending political motives.²¹

Aside from Freud, however, perhaps the most important influence came from Karl Mannheim, whose *Ideology and Utopia* Hofstadter had read but did not fully absorb until the early 1950s. Mannheim sought to rescue the concept of ideology from orthodox Marxism by expanding it to reflect more than just the economic interests of a given social class. In his definition, an ideology mirrors the total "life-situation"²² of a class or group and is derived directly from its day-to-day experiences. Nonetheless, Mannheim tended to retain the conventional Marxist notion of ideology as narrow, limited, and false precisely because the vision of any one class was necessarily constricted by its position within society. The task of the analyst, accordingly, is to identify the errors in various ideologies by connecting them to their respective social bases. "It is only when we more or less consciously seek to discover the source of their untruthfulness in a social factor," Mannheim concluded, "that we are properly making an ideological interpretation."²²

At first Mannheim's broadened concept of ideology proved immensely liberating to Hofstadter, especially when combined with other methods for studying symbolic action that he was discovering. It allowed him to move beyond the comparatively primitive debunking approach of predecessors like Beard, who had explained the political outlook of the Founding Fathers by reference to their personal finances, and to focus on a wide range of social determinants, such as status, ethnicity, vocation, and religion. Moreover, Hofstadter applied the concept dynamically, exactly as Mannheim intended, explaining certain styles of thought by the process of change in a group's position in the social hierarchy. Here lay the foundation for the "status politics" approach that Hofstadter employed in some of his most pioneering work in the 1950s and early 1960s. But here paradoxically also lay what in time became a major obstacle to Hofstadter's further progress as a historian, what prevented him from keeping up with those who moved to a less pejorative concept of ideology far more supple and sophisticated than Mannheim's.²³

These new influences on Hofstadter first became apparent in his 1952 article, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines." Building on the work of Julius Pratt, Hofstadter noted that the politics surrounding the acquisition of the islands, when viewed from the standpoint of economic interests, was filled with contradictions. Business leaders who ultimately benefited from the Spanish-American War had originally opposed it, while few of the jingoists who clamored for it had any

²¹ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, 1957), 51, 64–66, 73–80; Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter," 318–19; Gillam, "Richard Hofstadter," 79–80; C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York, 1951); and Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 361–62.

²² Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (1936; New York, 1968), 56, 78, 81, 61; Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 361–62; and Job L. Dittberner, *The End of Ideology and American Social Thought, 1930–1960* (Ann Arbor, 1979), 13–14, 20–21.

²³ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 82–83.

material stake in annexation. To make sense of these events, Hofstadter ventured "onto the high and dangerous ground of social psychology," a terrain he felt must always be visited whenever "simple rationalistic explanations of national behavior leave us dissatisfied." The real source of expansionist fervor, he claimed, had been "the psychic crisis of the 1890's," brought about by a number of interlocking factors ranging from the rapid growth of large corporations to the general belief that the frontier was fast disappearing. These changes created a widespread anxiety about the country's future, manifested by "a restless aggressiveness, a desire to be assured that the power and vitality of the nation was not wanting." The war in turn served as a safe outlet for discharging these aggressive impulses, because its proponents could present it, "quite truthfully, as an idealistic and humanitarian crusade." Thus, the irrational needs of the psyche, even more than the calculated pursuit of profits, supplied the key to an understanding of the Gilded Age.²⁴

Hofstadter developed this style of symbolic analysis further in *The Age of Reform* (1955), a study of American political culture from Populism to the New Deal that became perhaps his most original and influential book. "So dramatically did Hofstadter revolutionize the study of American history through his emphasis on the function of symbolic statements and symbolic behavior," Howe and Finn noted, "that it is difficult to remember today how innovative these concepts once were." The book's starting point was the paradox of a successful reform movement—Progressivism—taking place during a period of general prosperity. If economic causes could not account for this phenomenon, he reasoned, Progressivism must be seen as a symbolic crusade that had provided vital psychic comfort in the midst of rapid social change. For Hofstadter, that change was decisive in recent American history, marking as it did the transition from a traditional, localistic agrarian society to a new urban, industrial civilization based on techniques of large-scale bureaucratic organization. The middle classes, Hofstadter explained, both welcomed this transformation as evidence of progress and feared it as a threat to their social status and most cherished values. Unable, and often unwilling, to reverse the course of historical development, middle-class Americans were at least able to ease their adjustment to it through participation in Progressive reform. Viewed from this psychological perspective, Hofstadter held, Progressive political rhetoric was anything but meaningless.²⁵

One dramatic result of this "status politics" approach was Hofstadter's re-evaluation of Theodore Roosevelt. Previously condemned for his "carnal larynx," TR now became "the first major political leader" to respond effectively to the plight of the Progressive constituency. No longer did Hofstadter consider Roosevelt's antitrust actions "a hundred times more noise than accomplishment." "These moves," he wrote, "by suggesting that the country at last had a President capable of taking a strong and independent stand in such matters, gave people confidence. . . . They were symbolic acts of the highest importance." On the practical side, antitrust

²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in Daniel Aaron, ed., *America in Crisis* (New York, 1952), 197, 183, 199, 174–75, 180, 182.

²⁵ Howe and Finn, "Richard Hofstadter," 10; and Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 5–7, 212–14, 217.

agitation served to put big business "on the defensive and to create a climate of opinion in which some reform legislation was possible." For those potential critics on the Left who might disdain such limited achievements, Hofstadter cited the speculations of Franz Neumann on how different twentieth-century German history might have been had that country experienced a Progressive movement. "So, after all," Hofstadter concluded, almost as if talking to his earlier self, "even the overblown rhetoric of the antitrust movement finds its place, and even the Progressive charade of antimonopoly takes on a function that goes beyond mere entertainment."²⁶

Equally striking was Hofstadter's fresh estimate of the New Deal, now described as a "drastic new departure" in American reform. Franklin Roosevelt, once derided as a man lacking coherent beliefs, became "a seasoned professional politician" who practiced "opportunistic virtuosity." Having "learned his trade straddling the terrible antagonisms of the 1920s," Roosevelt was perfectly suited to bridge the great cultural divisions within his party by gathering the reform-minded middle class, labor, the South, and various urban immigrant groups into a durable coalition. Thus, the alternative verdict, "If, from an economic standpoint, the New Deal was altogether lacking in that rationality or consistency which is implied in the concept of planning, from a political standpoint it represented a masterly shifting equipoise of interests." Hofstadter's initial allegiance to John Dewey and other "rational strategists of social change" was clearly starting to wane.²⁷

But if symbolic analysis led Hofstadter to a new appreciation of Progressivism and the New Deal, the opposite was true of Populism. Given his solicitude for the rural poor in his master's thesis, Hofstadter might have been expected to look favorably on the farmers' revolt. In his account, however, the Populists were men who looked primarily backwards, clinging to a mythical view of themselves as self-sufficient yeomen, although they had long since entered the modern world of capitalist competition. As a consequence they were doomed to repeated frustrations that in turn brought them to bigotry, xenophobia, and paranoid delusions. It is true that his often-quoted remark on how the movement had "turned sour, become illiberal and ill-tempered" referred not just to Populism but to "the Populist-Progressive tradition" as a whole; still, his many critics were surely right in detecting a particular animus against Populism and in claiming that he gave it a sinister coloration the movement did not really deserve. The key question, then, concerns his resort to a double standard. If Hofstadter was willing to grant the urban middle classes their symbolic comforts, why could he not do the same for the desperate and ruined farmers who needed such comforts even more?²⁸

²⁶ Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny," 195, and *Age of Reform*, 235, 237, 254-56.

²⁷ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 303, 307, 319. Two years later, Hofstadter escalated his enthusiasm for Roosevelt still more, writing of FDR's "gorgeous political virtuosity" and "gift for the genial straddle." See his "The Age of Hoover," *Encounter*, 9 (1957): 76-77.

²⁸ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 62-64, 58-59, 70-72, 77-81, 20. For criticism of Hofstadter's treatment of Populism, see William A. Williams, "The Age of Re-Forming History," *Nation*, 182 (1956): 554; Norman Pollock, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of *The Age of Reform*," *Journal of Southern History*, 26 (1960): 478-500; Schlesinger, "Richard Hofstadter," 301-03; C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1968), 141-66; and Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 172-73, 183-85. For a recent treatment of the subject that disagrees with Hofstadter in some

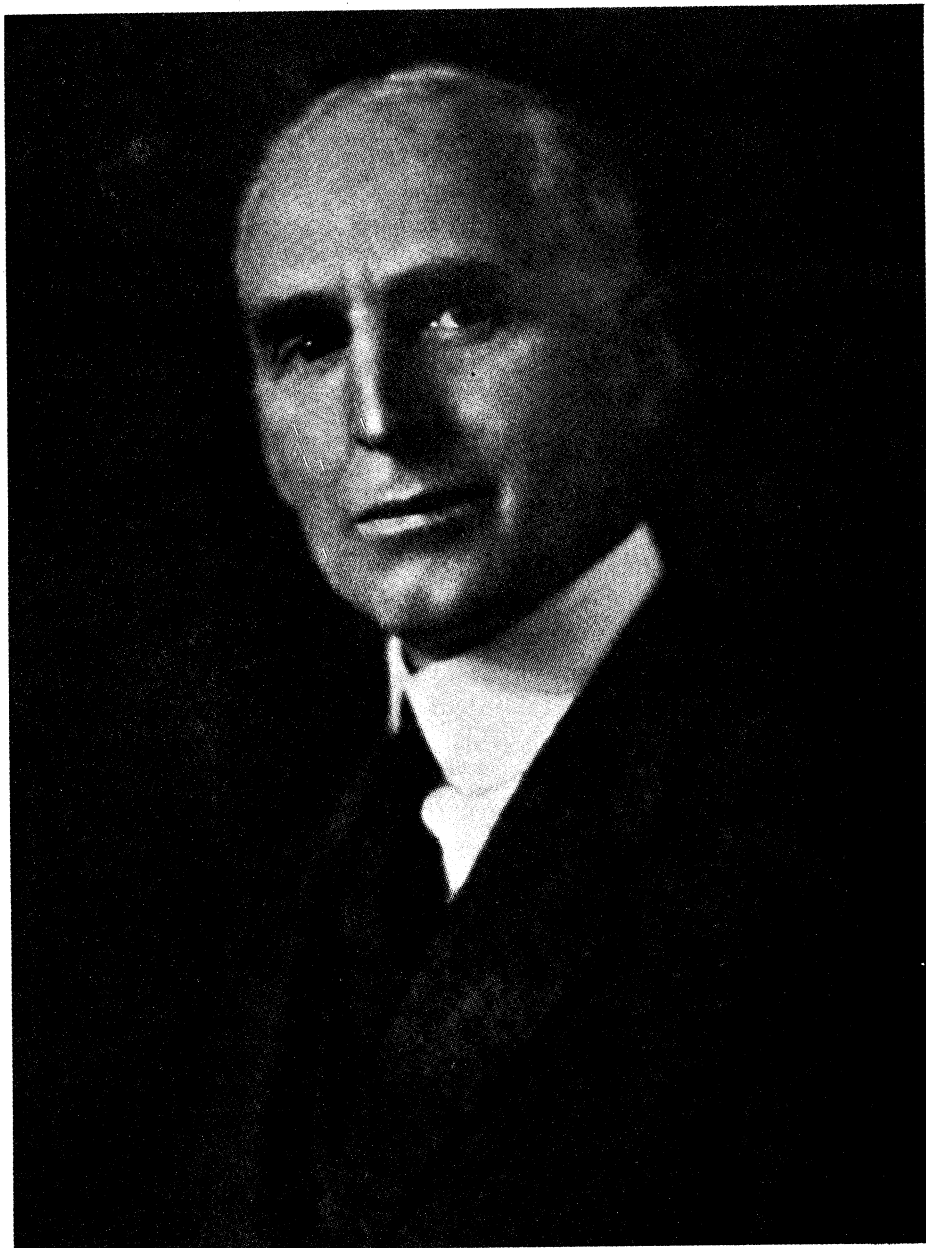


Figure 2: Charles A. Beard, President of the American Historical Association, 1933.
Photograph reproduced from the collection of the AHA, Washington, D.C.

The reason of course was McCarthyism and the rise of the “radical right.” In the introduction to *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter wrote that one of his chief aims was to show “that side of Populism and Progressivism—particularly of Populism—which seems very strongly to foreshadow some aspects of the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time.” Most writers on Hofstadter, however, have misunderstood the specific

respects but in others appears to provide significant support for his interpretation, see James Turner, “Understanding the Populists,” *Journal of American History*, 67 (1980–81): 355–56, 368–71.

manner in which the new Right affected him. It assuredly did not cause him to lose faith in popular democracy per se, as Michael Paul Rogin and others have suggested. His continued strong sympathy for working-class and minority movements in American history attests to that fact. Rather, McCarthyism served to revive and strengthen those cosmopolitan values that he retained from his 1930s world view, with its intense prejudice against small-town America. The gravest threat to personal and intellectual freedom, according to Hofstadter, always came from "local vigilantism"; by comparison, the vast powers of the federal government or large corporations seemed relatively benign. Thus, the terrifying aspect of McCarthy's crusade was its demonstration of how "it is now possible . . . for the local mobs to be animated from a central point, so that they can act in concert." This in turn was why the Populists appeared so dangerous—not because they were a mass movement but because they clearly represented that older, village America that Hofstadter identified instinctively as the source of political reaction and as a threat to all of his beliefs.²⁹

That perceived threat was to preoccupy Hofstadter throughout the following decade, producing an increasingly important effect on his thought. As the first page of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) announced, the book was undertaken as a "response to the political and intellectual conditions of the 1950's," especially McCarthyism. In it Hofstadter, following his cosmopolitan values, traced the source of anti-intellectualism in America to the common people, led by their evangelical preachers and by the "small-town lawyers and businessmen who are elected to Congress." Inherently suspicious of learning and urbanity, such folk reacted with righteous fury as events in the twentieth century undermined their village culture. "The older America . . . was wrapped in the security of continental isolation, village society, the Protestant denominations, and a flourishing industrial capitalism. But reluctantly, year by year, it has been drawn into the twentieth century and forced to cope with its unpleasant realities: first the incursions of cosmopolitanism and skepticism, then the disappearance of American isolationism and easy military security, the collapse of traditional capitalism and its supplementation by a centralized welfare state, finally the unrelenting costs and stringencies of the Second World War, the Korean War, and the cold war. As a consequence, the heartland of America, filled with people who are often fundamentalist in religion, nativist in prejudice, isolationist in foreign policy, and conservative in economics,

²⁹ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 20, "Liberty Bonds," *New York Review of Books*, January 23, 1964, p. 12, "A Progressive Hero," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1964, p. 8; Rogin, *Intellectuals and McCarthy*, 2–3; and Kenneth S. Lynn, "Elitism on the Left," *The Reporter*, July 4, 1963, pp. 37–40. Writing in 1969, Hofstadter went so far as to blame most of the violence in American history on small-town culture. "The story of our diminished violence, in those areas of our life where it has in fact largely been brought under control, has been in good part the story of the submergence and defeat of arbitrary, bigoted, self-satisfied local forces by the advancing cosmopolitan sentiment of a larger, somewhat more neutrally-minded state, or, better, national public. It has been marked by the replacement of small-town vigilantes by state authorities or national troops; the subordination of local sheriffs harboring secret or even open mob sympathies to the external forces of relatively neutral law." By contrast, Hofstadter did not especially fear the organized working class, even when it resorted to violence. In the same essay he noted that "most American violence" has come from those on the political right and has been "unleashed against abolitionists, Catholics, radicals, workers and labor organizers, Negroes, Orientals, and other ethnic or racial or ideological minorities." Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States," in Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York, 1970), 28, 11.

has constantly rumbled with an underground revolt against all these tormenting manifestations of our modern predicament." The most virulent outbreak of this mounting anger, he wrote, was the "Great Inquisition" of the 1950s.³⁰

Again, it should be stressed that here Hofstadter did not take an antidemocratic as much as an antivillage stance. If anything, he sympathized with those whose way of life was being swept away by the rush of events. "Perhaps the truly remarkable thing about the common American response to the modern world," he suggested, "has been its patience and generosity" on most occasions. Nor did he blame the people alone for the tensions that existed between them and the intellectuals. On the contrary, he recognized that much of that tension arose from the very nature of the life of the mind, with its elitist tendency to rank individuals on the basis of intelligence and attainment and with its "aristocratic" requirements of extensive education and leisure. "It is rare for an American intellectual to confront candidly the unresolvable conflict between the elite character of his own class and his democratic aspirations." Yet that was one of Hofstadter's main objectives in this book. His conclusion held that such conflicts in modern society are inevitable, normal, and often healthy, especially when they serve to deflate the pretensions of intellectuals and to keep them in touch with reality.³¹

What Hofstadter vigorously condemned in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and elsewhere was the dogmatic and fanatical mentality of those traditionalists who became political extremists. The problem with these "one hundred per centers," whom he believed had spearheaded both the fundamentalist crusade in the 1920s and the postwar radical Right, was their insistence on seeing issues in polar terms; they could "tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism." Their diametric opposites were the practicing politicians, whose mentality, as he described it, sounds suspiciously like that of the modernist intellectual. "It accepts conflict as a central and enduring reality and understands human society as a form of equipoise based upon the continuing process of compromise. It shuns ultimate showdowns and looks upon the ideal of total partisan victory as unattainable, as merely another variety of threat to the kind of balance with which it is familiar. It is sensitive to nuances and sees things in degrees. It is essentially relativist and skeptical, but at the same time circumspect and humane." Regardless of whether the garden-variety politico really possesses the subtlety attributed to him here, this passage clearly reveals the transition that had taken place in Hofstadter's thought. His previous belief that effective political action must be guided by a rational, cohesive, and well-articulated set of "social ideas" had given way to an admiration for the professional's ability to juggle skillfully the interests and ideals of competing social groups, even though the outcome may often appear irrational. This explains his double standard on Populism; the Progressives had employed

³⁰ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963), 3, 36–37, 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42–43, 407–08. Most reviewers of Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* regarded it as yet another attack on American mass culture. One of the few who caught Hofstadter's more subtle intent was Benjamin DeMott. See his "America Absolved," *New York Review of Books*, Summer 1963, p. 13. Hofstadter himself insisted with some exasperation on his attempt at even-handedness. As he wrote an old friend, "The idea that I am trying to *understand* something and not draw up indictments or hand out absolution is, I can now see, something that it will be very hard for many people to get." Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d. [June 1963], University of Massachusetts Archives, Amherst, Harvey Swados Papers.

symbolic politics flexibly and pragmatically, as evidenced by TR, while the Populists had indulged in the sort of strident moralism that Hofstadter associated with the fundamentalist mind and with village America.³²

In the mid-1960s, after witnessing the spectacle of the Goldwater campaign, Hofstadter further elaborated this concept of extremist politics and designated it the "paranoid style." Its identifying characteristic, he wrote, was the contention that all social ills could be traced to a single conspiratorial source and that consequently evil could be eliminated at one stroke by "some kind of final act of victory." To achieve that victory would require "not the usual methods of give-and-take, but an all-out crusade." This mentality, Hofstadter added, was not limited to the contemporary radical Right but could be found in such diverse movements as Anti-Masonry, Soviet communism, and, of course, Populism. All shared an "apocalyptic and absolutist framework." In Hofstadter's view, moreover, the paranoid style was unquestionably a manifestation of status politics. For those caught up in it, the main concern became the respect others accorded their cultural beliefs, rather than their economic well-being. In the case of the radical Right, the upsurge of paranoia reflected in essence a resurgence of the old 1920s fundamentalist crusade, which had been "interrupted and deflected by the depression, the New Deal, and the war" and whose adherents had reemerged convinced that they had at last located the source of their troubles in an international communist conspiracy.³³

But was this descent into paranoia an inevitable tendency of status politics? And did Hofstadter, as some critics charged, condemn all popular political movements? Here Hofstadter was remarkably unclear. At times, especially in those essays written during and immediately after the 1964 presidential campaign, his answer seemed to be yes. Because status politics entailed moral issues that could not easily be compromised, he appeared to say, the result of protracted agitation would always be unresolvable conflict, frustration, and an ultimate resort to fantasy. Interest politics, by contrast, was concerned with matters subject to normal bargaining through the brokerage of "skilled professionals"—a process that anchored it solidly in reality and made it typically "pragmatic" and "nonideological" in character. At other times, though, Hofstadter implied that the concerns of status politics—"religion, morals, personal style, and culture"—could enter the regular political process, that a truly skillful leader would be adept at juggling symbolic along with economic issues. His favorable assessment of Theodore Roosevelt in *The Age of Reform* rested squarely on that premise. Nor was Hofstadter invariably opposed to mass movements that engage in status politics. From the 1940s onward, for example, he warmly supported the civil rights movement, going so far as to march at Selma in 1965. In sum, though the charge that he was terrified of popular democracy will not hold up, it is true that his concept of status politics became increasingly confused. A distinction plainly existed in his mind between "normal" and "extremist" status politics, but he was never able to articulate it and all too frequently lost track of it.³⁴

³² Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 118–19, 134–35.

³³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), 4, 7–14, xii, 29, 17, 72–74, 77.

³⁴ Hofstadter, "Goldwater and His Party: The True Believer and the Radical Right," *Encounter*, 23 (1964): 5,

The Goldwater campaign had one other significant effect on Hofstadter; it supplied the final impetus for his embrace of a pluralist view of American politics. Indeed, his admiration for the two-party system now became a virtual obsession. In America, he argued, the "political party seems to be a rather blunt instrument, . . . but it is in fact a highly sophisticated piece of apparatus, very appropriate to its vital function." Its various rituals, meaningless as they might at first appear, were all designed to keep the system operating smoothly. A perfect example was the party platform, "an important symbolic act, in which the leaders prove to themselves and to the country that they stand close enough to agree on a statement of promises and proposals." The very vagueness of those proposals was itself a virtue, "a token of the capacity to compromise." To Hofstadter in 1964, nothing was more important than keeping the issues sufficiently blurred. "Critics of our system. . . have often argued that a sharper division in our party ideologies along conservative and progressive lines would serve us better. They have assumed that keener ideological debate and greater intellectual clarity would be identical, and that it would be better to fight out our social issues to some kind of satisfactory finish rather than to go on smoothing them over in the inconclusive manner of our major parties. It appears that we are now about to get a sharper ideological division, and keener social conflict, and they may not like it as well as they anticipated." At the start of his career he had treated consensus politics and the American party system with a critic's scorn; now he angrily accused Goldwater of violating "the basic American consensus."³⁵

Hofstadter's perception of the 1964 campaign arose directly from his cosmopolitan and pluralist values. In his view, Goldwater was in essence "a small-town politician," "a prosperous provincial merchant" who had never learned the rules of the game. "Much of his difficulty," Hofstadter claimed, stemmed from "the fact that his serious political education began only recently." Above all, Goldwater and his staff (also made up of "amateurs and provincials") ignored the "professional code" of American politics, with its stress on downplaying partisan emotions and conciliating defeated opponents. True professionals, Hofstadter insisted, were aware "that their promises, which express rather what they think they should offer to do than what they think they can do, cannot be perfectly fulfilled." Instinctively they turn away from ideology as too "divisive." But Goldwater, the "partisan evangelist," could not fathom these "baffling ambiguities and compromises" of the system; he saw the world in polar terms of good versus evil. With disdain for the usual bargaining and bickering of interest politics, Goldwater aimed "to drive the politics out of politics," and Hofstadter, having just gained an appreciation of the system's inner workings, could not let that happen without protest.³⁶

In his remaining years, alongside various historiographic writings, Hofstadter devoted his time to exploring the origins of two-party politics in America. Most

"A Long View: Goldwater in History," *New York Review of Books*, October 8, 1964, p. 18, *Paranoid Style*, 77, 86–90, ix, 121, 52–53; conversation with Hofstadter, New York City, April 5, 1968; and Rogin, *Intellectuals and McCarthy*, 15, 17, 22–23, 30.

³⁵ Hofstadter, "Goldwater and His Party," 3–5, *Paranoid Style*, 107–08, and "A Long View," 20.

³⁶ Hofstadter, "Goldwater and His Party," 8, 13, "A Long View," 19, 17, *Paranoid Style*, 101–07, 121, and "The Goldwater Debacle," *Encounter*, 24 (1965): 68.

striking was how thoroughly his views on the early national period had changed since 1948. Jefferson, condemned earlier as “a machine leader” was lauded in *The Idea of a Party System* (1969) precisely for “his part in creating the first truly popular party in. . . the Western world.” Once accused of hypocrisy for his decision to retain Hamilton’s bank, he was now said to have possessed an admirably “circumspect and calculating mind,” as demonstrated by his willingness “to accept [the bank’s] existence, even its expansion, so long as he could go on grumbling and denouncing it.” The true hero of the book, however, was surely Martin Van Buren, the consummate party operator who, Hofstadter noted, once displayed his “agile flexibility” by giving a lengthy speech on the tariff, only to leave his listeners totally divided as to how he stood on the issue. The son of an upstate New York tavern keeper, Van Buren had risen from local politics, learning his trade the hard way. Blessed with “keen intelligence but no notable intellectual brilliance or wit,” he was “the placatory professional politician, whose leadership comes in large part out of his taste for political association, his liking for people, and his sportsmanlike ability to experience political conflict without taking it as ground for political rancor.”³⁷

The thesis of the book, in short, amounted to an untrammelled celebration of pluralism. Although the Founding Fathers had begun as antiparty thinkers, Hofstadter told us, they learned through “the pragmatic pressures of political conflict” the benefits of party organization. Parties, they discovered, were indispensable instruments of cohesion in a rootless, scattered, and dynamic society like the United States. Parties were also essential for realizing the nation’s democratic creed. Only by uniting through party discipline could ordinary men hope to match the advantages of wealth and standing that the well-born brought to political affairs; that was why leaders like Van Buren willingly surrendered their own opinions to that of the party majority. Such men learned further from experience the need for preserving a legitimate opposition in a free society. The sacred function of the opposition party, they came to realize, was to articulate the grievances of discontented citizens, to fashion those grievances into plausible programs, and to bargain with the majority party in hopes of reaching a new social “consensus.”³⁸

Several writers have detected a strong conservative trend in these later works, and one has gone so far as to enroll Hofstadter posthumously among the “neo-conservative” intellectuals of the late 1970s and 1980s. Certainly one can charge him with accepting too uncritically the formulations of pluralist political science; still, the conservative label does not really fit a complex figure like Hofstadter. Seen from one standpoint, his pluralist beliefs reflected a move away from his earlier elitism. His new favorites, the members of Van Buren’s Albany Regency, were, as he pointed out, “locals rather than cosmopolitans,” self-made men from obscure small-town backgrounds rather than well-educated and urbane intellectuals. Surely Hofstadter’s ability to surmount his cosmopolitanism and recognize the special

³⁷ Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 1, 150, 159–60, 247–48, 215–16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84, 252, 70–71, 209, 243–46, and “The Development of Political Parties,” in John A. Garraty, ed., *Interpreting American History: Conversations with Historians* (Toronto, 1970), 152, 159.

talents of such men cannot be construed as antidemocratic. Moreover, though he valued moderation and pragmatism, Hofstadter also made it plain that he did not favor an "excess of consensus." His endorsement of the two-party system was premised on the assumption that the parties would always take substantive issues seriously and would reflect real social divisions in their respective programs. The two major parties "may not differ as night from day," he observed, "but some of the issues they pose are clear enough to enable a thinking person to make a rational choice between them at most points in history." The politics he enjoyed were always partisan and contentious, rather than bland and tranquil; his favorite decade remained the 1930s, not the 1950s.³⁹

Whether or not he had shifted toward the Right, the intrinsic appeal of pluralism was most decisive for Hofstadter. For one thing, it provided him with an analytic framework complex and flexible enough to do justice to his basic modernist tenets. Ever since William James and John Dewey first articulated the pluralistic mode of thought, it has helped shape the modernist vision of an open and unfinished world in which a multiplicity of historical forces and beliefs vie constantly with one another without any attaining permanent dominance. Such an approach has allowed modernist writers to fulfill their primary objective of portraying human existence in its full paradoxical intricacy. Thus, Hofstadter, once his pluralist perspective had matured, was able to construe the workings of the American political system as at once dynamic and stable, contingent and predictable, combative and consensual—an account far more intellectually satisfying to him than that provided by his initial Progressive-Marxist perspective.⁴⁰

But the chief reason why Hofstadter embraced pluralist theory was that it served to answer the riddle with which he had begun his career. It explained for him the seeming disjunction between the public rhetoric and actual behavior of political leaders. Rituals, like party platforms and conciliatory patronage, that appeared inexplicable if measured by standards of ideological consistency became fully comprehensible when seen as a means of preserving party cohesion. And what pluralist theory could not explain, his concept of status or symbolic politics frequently could, although, as we have noted, his understanding of how to combine party and symbolic politics was murky at best. Thus, Hofstadter completed his quest. American politics might appear hopelessly irrational on the surface, but, once its latent functions and distinctive culture were correctly interpreted, it had to be considered, if not a thing of shining beauty, at least the best system of governance yet devised.

³⁹ Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York, 1979), 5, 17, 32; Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, 240–41, 5 n., "Political Parties," in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York, 1968), 210, 215–16, "Development of Parties," 159; and Howe and Finn, "Richard Hofstadter," 17–18. A highly perceptive critique of Hofstadter's embrace of pluralism, which ties it directly to his ideological enthusiasms of the 1930s, appeared in Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983), 238–39, 240–47. Hofstadter seems a poor candidate for inclusion among the "neo-conservatives," since he failed both to join the Congress for Cultural Freedom and to contribute regularly to *The Public Interest*, two prime criteria for identifying a neoconservative according to Steinfels. Moreover, his whole critique of the "paranoid style" amounted to an indirect attack on American attitudes toward the Cold War. See Steinfels, *Neoconservatives*, 5, 29, 48.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 442; and Singal, *War Within*, 8.

IN RECENT YEARS, WRITERS ON AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY have been asking with increasing frequency whether a new central paradigm has emerged to take the place of consensus history. At first it appeared that the New Left or Marxist approach might supply the answer, but with the passing years it has become clear that the Marxists represent only one of many new voices in the postconsensus era. Others have looked to the new social history as a potential organizing force, with its quantitative techniques, imaginative use of nonliterary sources, and borrowings from social science theory. Once again, however, the movement has not proved to be as central as expected. Although the influence of the new social historians has been extensive, it has typically taken the form of methodological innovation rather than an overarching interpretation of the American past. Faced with these facts, many have given up the search for a new synthesis except to suggest that a revival of narrative history may be in store. How, one wonders, could an organizing scheme ever be found that would encompass the work of most major historians of the last two decades, writers as disparate in research interests and political views as Bernard Bailyn, Eugene D. Genovese, and Robert H. Wiebe?⁴¹

If the basis for such an interpretive synthesis does exist, perhaps the best way to discover it would be to recall the manner in which the previous synthesis arose. Consensus writers in the 1940s and 1950s did not set out in concert to create something called consensus history. Rather, simultaneously but individually they became dissatisfied with the Progressive portrait of American history as a perpetual battleground between two warring ideologies representing two distinct economic groups—the “people” versus the “interests.” As John Higham reminded us, this process was gradual and “cumulative.” “One after another, the great crises, which progressive historians had depicted as turning points in the battle between democracy and privilege, came under fresh examination. In each case the scale of conflict seemed to shrink. Sharp divisions between periods, sections, groups, and ideologies disappeared.” Not every important study of American history published during the 1950s participated in this reinterpretation or even accepted its premises, but enough did, directly or indirectly, to constitute a trend. The place to hunt for a new synthesis, then, would be in those areas where scholars have recently challenged the belief central to consensus history that the nation’s past has been characterized by the absence of ideological conflict. And, indeed, what one finds in many of the most influential books of the last two decades is a common emphasis on ideological change, to the point where one might even speak of a new “ideological change” mode of interpretation. Such an approach has certainly become dominant for those who work in Hofstadter’s own bailiwick, the history of American political culture, and perhaps among American historians generally.⁴²

⁴¹ Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *AHR*, 87 (1982): 2–6, 24; C. Vann Woodward, “A Short History of American History,” *New York Times Book Review*, August 8, 1982, pp. 3, 14; and Higham, *History: Humanistic Scholarship in America*, 238–40. Also see Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present*, no. 85 (1979): 3–24.

⁴² Higham, *History: Humanistic Scholarship in America*, 214; Wise, *American Historical Explanations*, 83–85; and Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 437–39. It should be emphasized that no historiographic synthesis ever gains complete sway over historians of a given generation. As Michael G. Kammen reminded us, “Those who assume that once-upon-a-time a Beardian synthesis truly prevailed have either forgotten, or else never knew, how many serious historians refused to accept that synthesis even in its *soi-disant* hey-day.” Rather, it is a case of one style of

Most significant, this new synthesis came into being partly as the result of a new concept of ideology that developed in the social sciences during the late 1950s and early 1960s and gained rapid acceptance among historians. The foremost exponent of this new concept was the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose writings have been cited so often by historians that it has become something of a professional embarrassment. "More than any recent vogue," Ronald G. Walters observed, "this one cuts across the methodological, national, and temporal boundaries that usually divide the profession. Reading Geertz appears to be one of the few things shared by people who seldom read each other." Social historians, political historians, and intellectual historians, Marxists, liberals, and conservatives—all have made abundant use of Geertz.⁴³

The reason for this broad appeal is that Geertz, for better or worse, succeeded in neutralizing the concept of ideology, eliminating its totalitarian connotations, and transforming it into a valuable analytic tool. He insisted on seeing ideology as "a cultural system"—a complex array of symbols, values, and beliefs that enables members of a society to order and give meaning to their political and social lives. Ideology, within this definition, reflects the entire way of life prevalent in the society, not just the status of a particular class or group. (In the Marxist variation, derived from Antonio Gramsci, the "ruling class" succeeds in imposing its values on the rest of society through "cultural hegemony," but the practical result is much the same.) Ideology changes not with periodic shifts within the social structure but in consonance with changes in the whole social and economic order. In this new formulation, moreover, ideology is not invariably partial or erroneous—again in sharp contrast to Mannheim. To the extent that ideology embodies the meanings with which people interpret their social environment, it is epistemologically "true." As Geertz put it, the earlier contentions "that the findings of (social) science necessarily will undermine the validity of the beliefs and values that ideology has chosen to defend and propagate seem most dubious assumptions."⁴⁴

Employing this powerful new concept, historians have uncovered patterns of ideology and ideological change running throughout the American past. While no author to date has traced such changes over the full course of three and a half centuries, many have attempted to delineate the chief ideologies and to show how one has given way to another. In each case, it has been assumed that the ideologies are not divisive but in fact provide an important source of cohesion for the society. Eric Foner's comment on the ideology of the North just prior to the Civil War is an example. "Like all ideologies, the Republicans' was more than merely the sum of its

interpretation setting the terms of scholarly debate to a greater extent than any other and providing whatever focus temporarily exists in an inherently centrifugal discipline. Kammen, "Extending the Reach of American Cultural History: A Retrospective Glance and a Prospectus," paper presented at the Seventy-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, held in Cincinnati, April 6–9, 1983. I am grateful to Kammen for supplying me with a copy of his paper.

⁴³ Walters also detected "a generational element in Geertz's popularity," observing that many of the historians who have borrowed from him "came of intellectual age in the 1950s and early 1960s"; Walters, "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians," *Social Research*, 47 (1978): 537–39, 541, 551.

⁴⁴ Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York, 1964), 62–64, 72; Nigel Harris, *Beliefs in Society: The Problem of Ideology* (London, 1968), 41–43; and Walters, "Signs of the Times," 541, 545–46, 548.

component parts: it must be understood as a total Gestalt, whose elements blended into and reinforced one another. Indeed, the key to its widespread acceptance was its multifaceted nature. A profoundly successful fusion of value and interest, the ideology could appeal in different ways to various groups within the party, and it gave northerners of divergent social and political backgrounds a basis for collective action. It provided the moral consensus which allowed the North, for the first time in history, to mobilize an entire society in modern warfare." As Foner demonstrated, even the majority of Northern Democrats shared this "free soil" ideology. Yet this ideological "consensus" was perforce temporary: "paradoxically, at the time of its greatest success, the seeds of the later failure of that ideology were already present. Fundamental changes were at work in the social and economic structure of the North, transforming and undermining many of its free-labor assumptions." Not ideological conflict, in short, but rather a conception of continuous ideological change lies at the heart of this mode of interpretation.⁴⁵

Any attempt here to describe the cumulative findings of this "school" must be brief and superficial. Because the historians who pioneered this new approach sometimes contradict one another, many difficulties arise when their work is spliced together to form a chronological sequence. Moreover, when viewed closely, the subject inevitably becomes complicated: ideologies often overlap, their impact varies considerably in terms of specific geographic regions and social groups, and in several cases once-dominant ideologies linger long after their era of ascendancy. The reign of any one ideology, in short, is never really firm or complete; rather, it seems to be a case of a continuing dialogue between the ideology (or ideologies) of the moment and those that remain from the past. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern a general pattern of five major ideologies arranged in a cyclical fashion that constitute the basis for this new interpretive synthesis.

First in the sequence came Puritanism, which, as Michael Walzer pointed out in 1965, was as much an ideology as a formal theology. Since that time, a multitude of colonial-era "community studies" have appeared that have usually been regarded as methodological archetypes of the new social history. In fact, most have centered on the story of how Puritan ideology initially flourished in the American environment, then gradually became undermined as social and economic conditions changed. In his study of Dedham, Massachusetts, for example, Kenneth A. Lockridge showed how "the coherent social vision" of a harmonious communal order that motivated the town's founders slowly fell apart over the span of a century in the face of demographic pressures on land, the rise of commercial activity, and the ensuing political conflict. By the 1730s, he concluded, these factors "had done much to supply the experiential foundations of a new ideology."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 10, 307–10, 316–17.

⁴⁶ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970), 4, 17–18, 135–36, 144–47, 175; and Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 27, 66. Also see Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); and Stephen Foster, *Their Solitary Way: The Puritan Social Ethic in the First Century of Settlement in New England* (New Haven, 1971).

What began to replace Puritanism by the mid-eighteenth century was republicanism. Perhaps no other American ideology has received so much attention from historians, primarily because of the role it plays in current interpretations of the American Revolution. A number of writers, including Robert E. Shalhope and Dorothy Ross, have ably summarized this growing body of literature. As the typical account describes it, republican ideology was based on a concern for individual liberties balanced against the need for sustaining public virtue. It was appropriate to a society in which various forms of small-scale commerce thrived but where true market capitalism had not yet taken hold. Indeed, the ideology of republicanism associated capitalism with corruption, luxury, and excessive self-striving. Through the work of Bernard Bailyn, relying on what he explicitly called his "anthropological" approach to ideology, republicanism is now usually seen as the chief motor force of the Revolution, the set of beliefs that impelled Americans into their break with Britain. Gordon S. Wood in turn has demonstrated how it subsequently shaped the formation of the new federal and state governments. Recent writers on the Jacksonian period have also detected republican ideology at work controlling political behavior, but by that time it had, in Shalhope's words, "assumed a stagnant—indeed stultifying—character."⁴⁷

The sequence continues with what Foner termed the "free-labor" ideology—but which might as easily be known as the market capitalist ideology—that gradually gained ascendancy over republicanism in the North beginning in the 1820s and 1830s. It demanded that each individual be free to compete in the marketplace and advance himself to the extent that his skills and initiative permitted. All obstacles blocking the individual's path were to be removed; values were to be set by the market rather than by an elite delegated to uphold public virtue. Others, especially Paul E. Johnson in his *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, have shown how this philosophy of economic individualism was closely bound up with the evangelical religious impulse and reform movements of the era. Southern slavery, of course, came to symbolize for Northerners the very antithesis of "free-labor" values. Thus, many historians today perceive the clash of this ideology with its counterpart in the South as the root cause of the Civil War.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (1972): 49–80, esp. 78, "Republicanism and Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 39 (1982): 334–56; Dorothy Ross, "The Liberal Tradition Revisited and the Republican Tradition Addressed," in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), 116–31; Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973), 23–24, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969); and Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, Calif., 1957). For an excellent community study that ties the development of republican ideology to everyday social life, see Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976). Also see Robert L. Kelley, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York, 1978); Richard V. Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789–1815* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972); Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978); and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1975).

⁴⁸ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor*, 11–18; and Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978), 5, 8, 135, 138, 141. For a survey of recent historiography on the causation of the Civil War and its relation to free-labor ideology, see Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1980), 15–33. A corollary development has taken place in the field of labor history, where the main focus has been the resistance that nineteenth-century workers displayed toward free-market

The most comprehensive description of that Southern or plantation ideology has been provided by Eugene D. Genovese and those influenced by him. Slavery, they argue, gave the South a distinctive social and ideological system. Planters felt a moral obligation to exercise lordship over their chattels and their society generally. Their quasi-aristocratic ethos was sharply at odds with the capitalist ambitions of their Northern neighbors, as reflected in their paternalistic treatment of their slaves. "It was this side of things—the political hegemony and aristocratic ideology of the ruling class—rather than economic factors that prevented the South from relinquishing slavery voluntarily," Genovese claimed. Whether this ideology perished during the war or persisted into the late nineteenth century is at present a major topic of dispute among Southern historians.⁴⁹

The final ideology in the sequence remains the most poorly defined. Those who have written about it—including Samuel P. Hays, Alfred D. Chandler, and particularly Robert H. Wiebe—have tended to imply its existence rather than to describe it directly. Still, the "emerging organizational synthesis," as Louis Galambos has termed it, presupposes the triumph of a new bureaucratic ideology based on the needs and values of large-scale management. In Wiebe's account, this mentality arose as an almost inevitable response to the modernization and centralization of American society in the late nineteenth century. It supplied a framework of belief appropriate to life in a mature industrial state, where business, government, and labor were all organized on a national scale. In place of the world of autonomous individuals ordained by the market capitalist ideology, the new bureaucratic mode of thought, Wiebe noted, "pictured a society of ceaselessly interacting members and concentrated upon adjustments within it." Marxist historians like Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein have strongly deplored this new ideology, which Weinstein called "corporate liberalism," yet they generally concur with Hays and Wiebe on its origins and content. All sides, moreover, seem to agree that this bureaucratic ideology did not really overtake its predecessor in the minds of most Americans until the New Deal and that it should probably still be considered the nation's reigning ideology.⁵⁰

Here, then, is the pattern of ideological change that the present generation of

ideology, often because of their own lingering commitment to republicanism. See, for example, Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976), esp. 16–17, 43, 60, 79–80, 87. Gutman explicitly acknowledged an indebtedness to Geertz.

⁴⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965), 7–8, 28–31, 34–35. Also see his *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York, 1969), and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). For a bibliographic guide to the dispute over the persistence of plantation ideology, see Numan V. Bartley, "In Search of the New South: Southern Politics after Reconstruction," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (1982): 151–55.

⁵⁰ Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review*, 44 (1970): 279–90; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967), esp. 145–63; James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900–1918* (Boston, 1968); Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago, 1957); Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); Jerry Israel, ed., *Building the Organizational Society: Essays on Associational Activity in Modern America* (New York, 1972); Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (New York, 1963), esp. 280–87; Ellis W. Hawley, "The Discovery and Study of a 'Corporate Liberalism,'" *Business History Review*, 52 (1978): 309–20; and Frank Tariello, Jr., *The Reconstruction of American Political Ideology, 1865–1917* (Charlottesville, 1981). Some historians have also begun to investigate the numerous attacks made against the bureaucratic ideology during the twentieth century. For a particularly skillful analysis of an important "dissident ideology" of the 1930s, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982), esp. 143–68.

historians, working independently of one another, has collectively set forth. It expressly challenges the consensus school thesis of a past marked by continuous agreement on fundamental principles, yet it does retain elements of the consensus approach. Indeed, a dialectician might well view this new synthesis as a summation of both Progressive and consensus historiography, since it allows for both ideological conflict and consensus, although set in alternating historical periods. Implicit in its explanatory scheme is a rhythm whereby a relative consensus exists for a time, then clashes with a new ideology that is starting to replace it, only to give way finally to what becomes the new consensus. What is striking is the far greater degree of interpretive sophistication that such a framework provides by comparison with those of the two previous schools. One suspects that this is what Hofstadter had in mind when he observed in his epilogue to *The Progressive Historians* that the best "way of characterizing what has happened in our historical writing since the 1950's" was "the rediscovery of complexity in American history." Hofstadter spoke of "a pluralistic vision," but his description of its attributes—"an ability to recapture the meaning of ideas in history by seeing how they function in their pragmatic institutional settings and by following their course of development in periods of social change"—and his choice of Bailyn as an illustration of the new tendency suggests that he really had the "ideological change" writers in mind.⁵¹

Hofstadter in fact might well stand as the intellectual godfather of this new dispensation. After all, it was Hofstadter who, as early as the late 1940s, chose American political culture as his main subject of study and demonstrated in *The American Political Tradition* how fruitful such a focus could be. It was Hofstadter who, in attempting to make sense of that political culture, began exploring the symbolic uses of politics in the nation's history. By doing so, he called attention to a style of analysis that historians of the United States had not significantly used before. Only a short step separated his handling of symbol systems within political culture from that of Geertz.⁵²

Yet Hofstadter himself did not, and possibly could not, take that step. At that critical juncture his firm embrace of Mannheim became paradoxically one of his greatest liabilities. Ideology for him remained tied to a particular social class or group and thus invariably was seen as parochial, erroneous, and divisive. To a historian like Foner, as we have noted, ideology was what cemented the alliances within a political party; to Hofstadter, real ideological conflict could only tear the two-party system (and, by implication, the society) apart. Moreover, in Hofstadter's formulation ideology became curiously detached from the mainstream evolution of American society and culture. It was in essence a by-product of the strain created

⁵¹ Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 442–43.

⁵² Robert Kelley, in his account of how American historians have learned to view ideology with more sophistication over the years, made the same essential point. "With Richard Hofstadter, we learned to explore the imagery of political rhetoric so as to discover the patterns of public ideology. He also taught us to think not only of socioeconomic class, but of specific cultural milieux in which particular moods and political world views are generated. Out of this came a new sensitivity among scholars to the power of the irrational, to tendencies among political groups to be swayed by concerns over status and by paranoid beliefs about evil conspiracies." Kelley added, however, that this "older intellectual history of politics, in the Hofstadter style" was weakened by its focus "on the ideas of the leadership" and by its vagueness in discerning the ideological motives of voters. See Kelley, "Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon," *AHR*, 82 (1977): 531–32.

when social groups rose or fell in status, a cry of pain and anger from those who, like the fundamentalists, could not adjust to changed circumstances—and not an expression of the whole society's underlying cultural values, which were themselves constantly changing. For all his skill at interpreting the symbolic significance of the rhetoric of particular movements, he never looked beyond those movements to the larger patterns of ideological evolution. David M. Potter, for one, touched with great insight on this difficulty in his review of *The Progressive Historians* when he observed that Hofstadter had not really explained why Turner, Beard, and Parrington now seemed so dated. "Could Hofstadter have analyzed in a more direct way the specific changes in ideology which have made these three writers, once so perfectly attuned to the prevailing tendencies of social thought, so irrelevant?" Potter asked. "I think he could have, but he has not quite done so."⁵³

Might Hofstadter have begun to study ideological change, had leukemia not tragically cut short his life in 1970? There are a few indications that he would have. His introduction to *The Paranoid Style* defended his decision to focus on "style" in politics by noting how "it has become increasingly clear that people not only seek their interests but also express and even in a measure define themselves in politics; that political life acts as a sounding board for identities, values, fears, and aspirations." Later in the book he confessed to having "mixed feelings" about his old concept of status politics, suggesting that a new term like "cultural politics" or "symbolic politics" might be preferable. But his main concern continued to be the mischief that such symbolic political activity created. "What interests me here," he stated, "is the possibility of using political rhetoric to get at political pathology." Above all, he insisted on preserving "the fundamental importance of the distinction between status and interest politics." In his belief, the analyst must carefully separate interests, which are always politically legitimate, from ideology, which most often is not. Having battled so long to acquire his pluralist theory, he was not about to discard it. Nor was the ghost of Mannheim likely to be exorcised quickly.⁵⁴

WHERE, THEN, DOES HOFSTADTER BELONG in a chronicle of recent historiography? It should be apparent by now that the answer must be complicated. Although he was among the first to discover a consensus in 1948, the tone and viewpoint found in his early works could not be more opposed to the celebration of American virtue characteristic of the consensus school. As his career proceeded, however, he shared increasingly the consensus writers' assumption that American politics was unique and superior because it was nonideological. At the same time, he started to explore the great symbolic political conflicts of the post-Civil War era, breaking a path for the postconsensus historians whose concern was ideological change. But for a

⁵³ David M. Potter, "Conflict, Consensus, and Comity: A Review of Richard Hofstadter's *The Progressive Historians*," in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter* (New York, 1973), 190. It should be pointed out that Hofstadter's pejorative view of ideology, derived from Mannheim, was widely shared by his generation. For those who came of age intellectually in the 1930s, Job Dittberner observed, ideology was usually defined as "a lens through which a group perceives, distorts, organizes, and, falling captive to its own values, often absolutizes its world"; *End of Ideology*, 89, 157.

⁵⁴ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, viii-ix, 86-87, 6.

variety of reasons, including his now-outmoded concept of ideology, he was unable to join in that emerging interpretation. His course, then, was a zigzag, with no clear trajectory.

What does stand out sharply in his work is his commitment, not to a particular school or synthesis but to historiographic innovation itself. One sees in him a modernist mind devoted to flux and change, constantly reexamining assumptions and techniques, probing for new perspectives. It is surely a telling fact that no two of his books closely resemble each other. Indeed, it is hard to think of any other historian of his stature who has left behind such a diverse body of work. Even at the very end of his life he was embarked on a new and highly ambitious venture: a multivolume account of American political culture informed by the findings of the new social history, an area he had never explored. Thus, although he is often thought of as a synthesizer, it may be that his chief role within the profession was precisely that of a pathbreaker, for not one but two major schools of interpretation. As Howe and Finn pointed out, his intellect was "critical and multifaceted, rather than constructive and systematic." He was an experimentalist whose talent lay in opening new possibilities for others rather than in pursuing tidy conclusions himself. It is for this reason that one suspects Hofstadter will always elude easy classification—and that is exactly the way he would have wanted it.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Howe and Finn, "Richard Hofstadter," 22. A fragment of Hofstadter's projected multivolume work appeared posthumously as *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York, 1971). Although easily able to stand on its own, the book still gives few clues as to where the completed trilogy might have stood historiographically.