

The Life of the Mind: An Intellectual Biography of Richard
Hofstadter

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Abstract

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Despite his death in 1970, Richard Hofstadter's work continues to have an enduring influence in American political culture. Yet despite the continued and frequent use of his interpretations in public discourse, his reputation within historical scholarship remains, to a large degree, shaped by perceptions that were formed towards the end of his career. The narrative pervades of Hofstadter as the archetypal New York intellectual who rejected his youthful radicalism for political conservatism which, in turn, shaped his consensus vision of the past. These assessments reflect the biographical tendency to read a life and career backwards. From such a vantage point, Hofstadter's work is viewed through the prism of his perceived final position. My dissertation challenges the accepted narrative by considering his writing in the context of the period of time in which it was written. In doing so, it is evident that his work belies attempts to reduce his scholarship to reflections of a shifting political standpoint. Whilst it is undoubted that Hofstadter's historical and political view changed through time, there was a remarkable consistency to his thought. Throughout his career, his writing and lectures were suffused with a sense of the contingency of truth. It was the search for new uncertainties rather than the capture of truth which was central to his work. It was also fundamental to his politics. The sense of ambiguity and complexity that pervaded Hofstadter's writing and informed his political viewpoints was, I argue, a reflection of personal temperament. Naturally shy, his early correspondence shows a marked diffidence and ambivalence in the face of personal and political choice. The writing of history not only reflected this ambivalence but provided a means of working through it and of determining his own intellectual and political position. In this respect, Hofstadter provides his own self-narrative within his work. It is Hofstadter's own voice that provides the direction for my study. Perhaps more importantly, it is a voice that continues to provide instruction for those who would seek a role for the historian at the centre of the intellectual and political life of the nation.

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Introduction

Richard Hofstadter occupied a prominent position within the intellectual life of mid-twentieth century America. As De Witt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, and the author of two Pulitzer Prize winning works of history, he was considered one of the nation's preeminent historians. Yet his influence extended well beyond the narrow confines of the academy. Throughout his career he had managed simultaneously to engage a scholarly and a public audience, his work garnering praise in academic journals and the popular press alike. During his lifetime, his ability to combine critical and commercial success had been unrivalled. Nevertheless, his death came at a point when a younger generation of historians had commenced the work of revising his key assumptions and conclusions. These challenges to Hofstadter's historical interpretations set the terms of debate and coloured impressions of his work which have largely prevailed.

Hofstadter would have been unsurprised by the failure of his conclusions to stand the test of time. He had always viewed his works as provisional, aware that any explanation of the past is necessarily limited and contingent. His historical works were conceived as contributions to the contemporary debate, spurs to discussion, rather than the final word on the historical record. It was this desire to write history of relevance to the present, and to challenge long held beliefs, that ensured his was an important voice at a critical time in the history of American liberalism. It also meant that, as the political culture changed, his interpretations appeared to lose their sense of urgency and relevance. As Michael Kazin suggests, Hofstadter came to be viewed as 'an elegant ruin from a benighted age, an intellectual temple constructed from old-fashioned materials.' Nevertheless, almost thirty years after Hofstadter's death, Kazin's title confidently declared, "Hofstadter Lives".¹

¹ Michael Kazin, "Hofstadter Lives: Political Culture and Temperament in the Work of an American Historian," *Reviews in American History*, 27, (1999), 335.

Despite the passing decades and altered political landscape, Hofstadter's concepts have always retained a certain cultural currency within public political discourse. The pertinacious appeal, to significant sections of American society, of right-wing ideology and rhetoric continues to bemuse journalists and popular commentators on the left. Hofstadter provided a pre-packaged formula for analysis of the phenomenon. Terms such as 'paranoid style', 'pseudo-conservatism', 'status politics', and 'anti-intellectualism' swiftly entered the nation's vernacular and continue to be used in discussions of the allure of right-wing politics in America.² Until recently the persistence of these phrases in public discourse owed as much to the failure of political analysts to break free from mid-century interpretations of conservative thought as to Hofstadter's epigrammatic style. However, the shifting of the political environment has, once again, brought a renewed relevance to his analysis.

Within academic circles, Hofstadter's interpretations are cited with less frequency and rarely without challenge. Nevertheless, the widespread attention received by David Brown's 2006 biography of Hofstadter was indicative of, and indeed owed much to, the enduring interest of Hofstadter amongst historians and general readers alike.³ The publication offered a welcome opportunity for those within the historical profession to reconsider both his work and legacy.⁴ Whilst subsequent historical assessments of

² Since the beginning of the 2016 election campaign, there has been a remarkable increase in references to Hofstadter's work. Some examples include, Max Boot, "How the 'Stupid Party' Created Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/opinion/how-the-stupid-party-created-donald-trump.html>; Paul Musgrove, "Donald Trump is Normalizing Paranoia and Conspiracy Thinking in U.S. Politics," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/12/donald-trump-has-brought-us-the-american-style-in-paranoid-politics/?utm_term=.8a8f6cdca6cb; Bret Stephens, "The G.O.P. Bonfire of the Sanities," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/opinion/republicans-paranoia-mueller-trump.html>

³ David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴ In addition to the numerous reviews across academic journals and newspapers, the biography prompted a number of full-length articles. David Greenberg, "Richard Hofstadter Reconsidered," *Raritan*, 27 (Fall 2007), 144-167; James Livingston, "On Richard Hofstadter and the Politics of 'Consensus History'." *boundary 2*, 34 (Fall 2007), 33-46.

Hofstadter have tended to focus on specific works, it is evident that his scholarship remains a live subject for discussion.⁵

Despite the continued influence of Hofstadter's concepts on the nation's political discourse, historical interest has tended to consider his work in terms of its ability to cast a light on the intellectual and political tumult of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Those who have sought to use Hofstadter's life and works as reflective of his era have generally endeavoured to fit him into one of two interrelated narratives: the emergence of 'consensus history,' and the political journey of the New York intellectuals. These narratives were formed during Hofstadter's lifetime, became ossified during the 1960s, and continue to shape perceptions of his work. As Rick Perlstein wrote recently in the *New York Times*, 'Hofstadter was the leader of the "consensus" school of historians.'⁶ His definition of consensus history as an illusion constructed for ideological purposes is evidence of the persistence of interpretations of Hofstadter formed towards the end of his career.⁷

It was in the early 1960s that critics, no doubt influenced by images of formerly radical intellectuals retreating into quietude, began to describe Hofstadter as a consensus historian. The term had originally been coined by John Higham in an essay of 1959, to summarize what he saw as a growing tendency within American history to paint a celebratory picture of the nation's institutions and past. This unquestioning approval of American institutions was symptomatic of the deadening effect of contemporary

⁵ Robert D. Johnston and Gillis Harp, "Forum: Richard Hofstadter's 'The Age of Reform' Fifty Years On," 127-148; Nick Witham, "Popular History, Post-War Liberalism and the Role of the Public Intellectual in Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition*," *The Historical Journal*, 59 (December 2016), 1133-1155; Tim Lacy, "The Critical, Conflicted, and Elitist Liberalism of Richard Hofstadter – And Why it Matters," <https://s-usih.org/2017/12/the-critical-conflicted-and-elitist-liberalism-of-richard-hofstadter-and-why-it-matters-part-1/>; "Symposium: Richard Hofstadter and *The American Political Tradition*," *Society*, 2 (March/April 2018), 107-160.

⁶ Rick Perlstein, "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," *New York Times*, April 11, 2017.

⁷ I address the origins of the concept of consensus history and the shifting perception of Hofstadter's work in relation to consensus history in "'The Important and Unfamiliar': Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition*," *Society*, 55 (April 2018), 136-141. Chapters 3 and 4 of the dissertation draw, in part, on the material within this article.

conservatism on the writing of history.⁸ Higham himself did not include Hofstadter's work amongst those he considered to be pervaded by the influence of contemporary conservatism. Indeed, Hofstadter's work was singled out for praise. However, not all critics were as discerning as Higham, and Hofstadter came to be seen as a central figure within a movement which was inextricably linked to political conservatism.

Interestingly, by 1970 Higham had rejected the idea that a consensus school existed and admitted it to have been a result of his own attempt to fit American historiography 'into the interpretative framework [his] preconceptions had erected.'⁹ Nevertheless, despite his own rejection of the concept, his original essay, which had been written as a challenge to those who sought to impose a limiting framework upon history, became itself a fixed interpretation. Interpretations of Hofstadter's work have largely been constrained by the enduring influence of the consensus model.

Peter Novick's influential survey of American historiography, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, confirms the accepted interpretation of Hofstadter's career. Novick's analysis reflects the continued association of Hofstadter with consensus history and the loss of political radicalism in the 1950's. Novick suggests that the writing of American history became decidedly more conservative in the wake of the publication of *The American Political Tradition*. According to Novick, 'from 1948 onward, among historians as among other academics and intellectuals, there was an accelerating abandonment of dissidence, a rapid accommodation to the new post-war political culture.'¹⁰ In Novick's study we find a version of the established story of the parallel developments between the changing historiographical model and the shifting political attitudes of liberal intellectuals. This flawed assessment of Hofstadter finds its clearest voice in Marian J. Morton's *The*

⁸ John Higham, "The Cult of 'American Consensus': Homogenizing our History," *Commentary* 27 (February 1959), 93-100.

⁹ John Higham, "American Historiography in the 1960s," in *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 159

¹⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 323.

Terrors of Ideological Politics, in which the author suggests that Hofstadter came to choose the role of 'the ideologue of capitalism.'¹¹

The impression that the origins of consensus history, by definition a conservative model of history, can be located within Hofstadter's 1948 work, *The American Political Tradition*, is still one that is commonly held. Yet as Higham himself so accurately remarked, Hofstadter wrote the work 'from a position so sympathetic to Beard and so critical of American business mores that his heresy seemed only a step to the left.'¹² Hofstadter had indeed suggested that the American political system was characterized more by broad agreement than by sharp conflict. However, this was not a statement of celebration, but rather a call for a radical reconsideration of the nation's liberal tradition. By placing Hofstadter's initial statement regarding consensus within its original context, my thesis highlights the weakness of the consensus framework as a means of understanding Hofstadter's career. It is undoubted that Hofstadter did come to value balance and stability within the American political system. However, this is best understood when considered not as a simple story of abandoned radicalism but rather within the context of a career long reflection on the fate of liberalism in America.

There have been attempts to analyse the shift in American historiography that avoid reducing the debate over competing visions of the American past to mere reflections of political difference. In his excellent 1973 study, *American Historical Explanations*, Gene Wise describes the development of new historical theories as dynamic responses of individual minds to situations. These theories are formed in interaction with, rather than being a simple reaction to, the wider social and political context.¹³ Importantly, the interaction is a very personal one and, therefore, attempts to reduce Hofstadter's work to being no more than a reflection of a loss of radical faith amongst a generation of liberal intellectuals fails to grasp the individuality of that work. That Hofstadter shared the experiences of those intellectuals with which he is associated is not in

¹¹ Marian J. Morton, *Terrors of Ideological Politics: Liberal Historians in a Conservative Mood* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972), 123.

¹² John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1965; New York: Harper Row, 1973), 213.

¹³ Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Enquiry* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1973), viii, 46.

question. However, the personal nature of the interaction between Hofstadter and the milieu within which he was writing is of central importance in understanding his work.

As Wise suggests, the 1940s saw a paradigm shift, an earthquake that shattered the interpretative assumptions of Progressive history. It is also the case, as David Noble points out, that whilst the earthquake had struck in the 1940s, the tremors had commenced in the 1890s as the Enlightenment faith in progress had been called into question. The events of the Second World War, coupled with the realization that the Progressive hope that capitalism could be humanized had proved mistaken, finally destroyed the optimism of earlier generations. Liberalism had long been linked with the idea of perfectibility of man, but the events of the 1930s and 1940s caused intellectuals to question the very basis of their beliefs. In the words of Ira Katznelson, liberal intellectuals 'confronted the wreckage not just of their own time but the dashed hopes of reason and knowledge.'¹⁴ In doing so, they sought to redefine and reposition liberalism in order that it might survive in the post-war period. It is within the wider context of this conversation amongst liberals that I place Hofstadter's historical works.

The importance of Hofstadter's role within mid-century liberalism and the intellectual life of New York City has inevitably led his work to be considered within the framework of the New York intellectuals. This association was central to those interpretations that placed consensus at the heart of Hofstadter's work. In this analysis Hofstadter's changing historiographical approach mirrored the political trajectory of the New York intellectuals from youthful radicalism to a mature acceptance of the limits of political process and, in some cases, to leading positions within the neoconservative movement. However, the assessment of the New York intellectuals in simple political terms is, as Terry Cooney notes, a result of 'the neat reconstruction of hindsight' and assigns a level of unanimity which did not exist.¹⁵ As a group of intellectuals they were 'notable above all for their individuality, complexity and independence.'¹⁶ Whilst they were

¹⁴ Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 160.

¹⁵ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 4.

¹⁶ Moses Rischin, "When the New York Savants Go Marching On," *Reviews in American History*, 17 (June 1989), 294.

undoubtedly a community of intellectuals with both shared concerns and backgrounds, attempts to assess their thought simply in terms of individual contributions towards a common political goal, fail to take account of the striking range of opinions within the group. These disparities in political viewpoint, less marked in the early years of *Partisan Review*, were clearly visible as the decades passed.

Cooney's analysis of the New York intellectuals in terms of their cosmopolitanism, rather than simply their political views, provides a framework for a more nuanced assessment of the New York intellectuals. Cooney focuses on continuity of thought rather than dramatic political shifts through an engagement with the complexities of their ideas, thus avoiding the tendency to dismiss them simply as disillusioned radicals. For Cooney there is a constant thread running through the writing of intellectuals like Philip Rahv and William Phillips, irrespective of where they positioned themselves politically. The reasons for joining the Communist Party were the very same reasons they left: a desire to live by cosmopolitan values. These values are defined by Cooney as the desire to be part of the 'conquest of crippling parochialisms, the attainment of intellectual sophistication, [and] the triumph of secularism and rationalism.'¹⁷ The interaction between these values and politics is not easily reduced to radical disillusionment.

Daniel Singal, a former student of Hofstadter's, saw clear parallels between Hofstadter's political and intellectual development and that of the coterie of intellectuals that formed around *Partisan Review* in 1940s and 1950s. According to Singal, 'Hofstadter stands out as an excellent example of a mid-twentieth-century modernist intellectual.'¹⁸ Hofstadter is portrayed 'as being symbolic of the post-war historians' final relinquishing of the Enlightenment faith in progress. Whilst the Progressives had formed part of an initial rebellion against the 'fundamental dualism of Victorianism', they were neither able completely to rid themselves of its moral dichotomy nor its ill-founded optimism. Hofstadter, on the other hand, viewed the historian's role as one of

¹⁷ Terry A. Cooney, "Cosmopolitan Values and the Identification of Reaction: Partisan Review in the 1930s," *Journal of American History*, 68 (December 1, 1981), 582.

¹⁸ Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review*, 89 (October 1984), 978.

getting to grips with the essential complexity of modern life rather than taking refuge in the false hopes that underpinned the Progressive framework. Hofstadter's desire to cast off the intellectual baggage of his historical forebears was, for Singal, reflective of his modernist outlook. Furthermore, it was an urban variant of modernism which Singal felt was best described as cosmopolitanism.

Sean Wilentz makes the point that 'nothing can be understood about Hofstadter... without understanding his visceral urban proclivities.'¹⁹ However, the impact of Hofstadter's urban setting on his work and character was not a straightforward one. As Thomas Bender has written of New York, it is 'itself a many-voiced conversation of unparalleled complexity.'²⁰ The conversations of which Hofstadter was part in New York altered through time. Originally drawn to the city for the possibilities of radical politics, he would spend most of his years there as a distinguished professor at the city's elite university. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote, he 'was one of the first major historians to come out of the cultural life of NYC; and this fact no doubt accounts in part for the character and direction of his work.'²¹ However, any attempt to determine the influence of New York must take account of the polymorphous nature of the city and Hofstadter's changing role within it. It is also significant that Hofstadter, despite spending the larger part of his life in New York City, was born in Buffalo. Whilst much of his writing displayed an explicit distaste for the rural mind, he was not uncritical of the equally parochial mindset of the New York intellectuals with whom he was often associated. Hofstadter would not have sought to deny that his vantage point was framed by his strong attachment to New York and Columbia University. Nevertheless, he maintained a level of critical detachment which ensured his intellectual independence.

David Brown's biography takes cosmopolitanism to be central to Hofstadter's historical work. Brown locates Hofstadter's work in the rapidly changing political and cultural context of the period and views his development as parallel to that of the New York

¹⁹ Sean Wilentz, "What Was Liberal History?," *New Republic*, 235 (July 10, 2006), 22.

²⁰ Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 6.

²¹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Richard Hofstadter," in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, eds. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 278.

intellectuals. Indeed Brown describes Hofstadter as a 'quintessential "New York Jewish intellectual."' ²² Brown proceeds to construct a narrative of the triumph of the urban, cosmopolitan mind over that of the Anglo-Saxon Protestantism that had dominated American life and intellect. According to Brown, Hofstadter sought to 'rewrite its history as a prelude to moving its culture'. ²³ Therefore, for Brown, Hofstadter saw his work as part of an ongoing battle against the parochialism of middle America, one that would see New York become the centre of American intellect and culture. However, the urban/cosmopolitan versus rural/parochial dichotomy is much too prescriptive as an interpretative framework for Hofstadter's scholarship.

Reading Hofstadter's liberalism and his historical work primarily through the filter of his urban sensibility risks losing the subtlety of Cooney's cosmopolitanism. Importantly, it also fails to grasp the very real political concerns that continued to exert an influence on Hofstadter's life and writing. Susan Stout Baker's biography, *Radical Beginnings*, provides invaluable insight into the strength of his early radicalism, and acts as an important corrective to earlier surveys of Hofstadter's intellectual development, which had tended to see his involvement in radical politics as a youthful aberration. ²⁴ For Baker the political engagement during his formative years, and more importantly his immersion in Marxist political theory, would ensure that his work retained an element of radical thought. Whilst Baker's assertion that Hofstadter retained a dialectical mode of thought seems overstated, her study makes clear the intensity of Hofstadter's radicalism and its importance in the shaping of his thought. Nevertheless, the tendency to view Hofstadter's radicalism as less than wholehearted still persists. ²⁵ It is the case that Hofstadter's politics are not easily reduced to party loyalty or political ideology. However, his continued involvement in the political issues

²² David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

²⁴ Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985).

²⁵ David Brown suggests that Hofstadter was 'never fully immersed' in radical politics. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 12.

of the day and a consistently critical approach to the political tenets of the time played a key role in his historical writing.

The element of cosmopolitanism, as described by Cooney, which was central to both Hofstadter's historical work and politics, was that of 'intellectual sophistication'. It was a value that was lost to varying degrees amongst the New York intellectuals, as the political events of the post-war period led to fierce political disagreement and increasingly dogmatic thinking. It is significant that Cooney's study ended in 1945 as the narrowing of the political realm had the effect of displacing the affirmative energy of their cosmopolitanism and leaving only a defensive negativity.²⁶ Hofstadter remained, as Irving Howe described, 'largely free of the obsessions [Howe] had come to suppose intrinsic to intellectual life.'²⁷ It was this open-mindedness and aversion to fixed ideas that suffused his work and informed his political responses to the world around him. His political liberalism was a reflection of his character and his liberalism of spirit led him to champion pluralism both within the historical profession and the political realm.

In an interview towards the end of his career, Hofstadter explained, 'I can never wholly identify with any collectivity.'²⁸ The conscious decision to remain on the periphery and to cultivate the role of intellectual outsider is of central importance to understanding Hofstadter's life and work. As Peter Gay described it, Hofstadter's position was that of 'self-chosen marginality'.²⁹ This independence was to a significant degree a result of both his natural circumspection and his unwillingness to see certainty when faced with ambiguity. In the mid-1950s, the key terms for liberal intellectuals would become those of complexity and ambiguity. However, for Hofstadter, such terms had been present in his thought from his early days in graduate school, and were frequently accompanied by an overriding sense of ambivalence. As a student he had vacillated

²⁶ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals*, 271

²⁷ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 323.

²⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, *Master Minds: Portraits of Contemporary American Artists and Intellectuals* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 168.

²⁹ Peter Gay, "Richard Hofstadter," biographical sketch attached to letter to Beatrice Hofstadter, May 22, 1978, Richard Hofstadter Papers, University Archives, State University of New York at Buffalo, (RHP SUNY) Box 1, Folder 5.

over his decision to join the Communist Party, unable to commit to a course of action of which he could not determine the rectitude. Throughout his career he remained reticent to make public pronouncements or cast a final judgment on issues over which he could not be unequivocal.

Whilst he had been dismayed by his own political and personal ambivalence as a young man, it would prove to be an essential element in his writing. His most influential works were successful because they disrupted certainty and called into question the accepted historical orthodoxy. As Alan Brinkley contends, Hofstadter's achievements 'lay less in creating durable interpretations than in raising new questions and establishing new modes of inquiry, in opening hitherto unperceived avenues of exploration.'³⁰ Hofstadter's innate resistance to accepting simple solutions to complex questions was brought to bear on the past, and ensured his scholarship challenged readers to look afresh at established truths. Whilst the passing of time renders it difficult to appreciate the impact of Hofstadter's work at the time of its publication, that impact cannot be underestimated.

The writing of history had a purpose for Hofstadter beyond that of simply prompting debate within the historical profession and wider society. Importantly, it provided a means of overcoming the sense of passivity he had felt as a young man as he struggled to act in the absence of certainty. As his son described, 'He was a very fragile, not very brave person, who became brave in his work,'³¹ Writing about the past offered the opportunity to act in the present and ensured he would have a voice in the political dialogue whilst remaining largely outside the fray. It also allowed Hofstadter to consider his own position in relation to the intellectual and political issues of the era. As he later explained to one of his graduate students, 'one never knows what one thinks...until one has tried to write it.'³² The process of writing was itself a dialogue, one in which Hofstadter engaged with the past, and reciprocally the past helped shape his own sense of both the present and his place in that present. Therefore the

³⁰ Alan Brinkley, "Richard Hofstadter's the Age of Reform: A Reconsideration," *Reviews in American History*, 13 (1985), 462.

³¹ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, xvii

³² Hofstadter to Michael Wallace, August 26, 1969, Richard Hofstadter Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, (RHP) Uncatalogued Correspondence.

refashioning of his historical narrative over time can be seen as an element in the reorientation of his own self-narrative in reaction to the altering intellectual and political landscape. As his close friend, Fritz Stern, described it, 'work was central to his life.' Hofstadter 'saw in his own work...a fulfilment of the self.'³³

Any attempt to write biography as intellectual history must come to terms with the flexible, fragmentary and fluid nature of the self. The concept of selfhood as a process rather than as a distinct entity, protean in nature, yet marked by a sense of continuity and simultaneously acted upon from within and without is a key problem for the biographer. The question of self has been one of central intellectual concerns in modern society. However, whilst the Renaissance saw the return of the self to the forefront of Western thought, contemplation of the interior life of man is not unique to the modern era. Classical thinkers confronted the position of the individual in the world and engaged with theories of a mutable self. Socrates positioned the inner life of man at the very centre of his philosophy. He echoed the sentiment of the Delphic dictum of 'Know Thyself' when he pronounced, 'the unexamined life is not worth living.' This self-examination was not seen as a solely introspective pursuit but rather one that was achieved through discourse and dialogue with others.

Søren Kierkegaard, a great admirer of Socrates, saw his role as one of provoking his contemporaries to self-reflection. Writing in 1835 of his attempts to find a sense of self, Kierkegaard proclaimed 'One must learn to know oneself before knowing anything else...for only in this will I be able to call myself "I" in a profounder sense.'³⁴ Kierkegaard saw the self as a task to be accomplished, not through reason but through choice. It is this feeling for our selves as dependent upon our acts that would ensure Kierkegaard's position as the father of existentialist thought. As Jerome Levin puts it, Kierkegaard restates 'Socrates injunction that "the unexamined life isn't worth living," but as an ontological not a normative position.'³⁵ The idea of the Kierkegaardian

³³ Fritz Stern, "In Memoriam: Richard Hofstadter 1916-1970," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 29, 1970, 6.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: a Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1996), 35.

³⁵ Jerome D. Levin, *Theories of the Self* (London: Taylor & Francis Inc, 1992), 65.

‘existential’ self is key to my biographical study of Hofstadter and my attempt to reconstruct his career in terms of his work being a process of self-narrative.

Michel Foucault, like Kierkegaard, finds merit in taking the principle of ‘knowing oneself’ as a starting point for a discussion of the self. In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault concentrates on the precept of ‘taking care of oneself’ as the first, but often forgotten, step towards knowledge of self. The methods available for the ‘caring of oneself’ are historically contingent but the role of reading and, more importantly to my study, writing offers a link between the classical world and the modern era. Foucault posits the role of writing as pivotal in ‘caring for the self’ and the constitution of self.³⁶ Of course, Foucault is mindful to make clear that the techniques available in self-formation are those that ‘are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group.’³⁷ This concept of ‘self-writing’, within these parameters, provides a framework for understanding the relationship between Hofstadter, his work, and the wider social and political environment.

Jerrold Seigel outlines three central elements of self; the ‘bodily or material, the relational, and the reflective dimensions.’³⁸ The three elements coincide roughly with the fields of psychology, sociology and philosophy. Seigel’s premise is that studies of the self have tended to favour one element to the exclusion of the others. Whilst both post-structuralist and psychosocial conceptions of self tend to limit the possibility of human agency in self-narration, Seigel’s consideration of the three distinct, albeit interdependent, elements of self allows agency a role. An awareness of the ‘multi-dimensional’ character of self ensures that the concept of self-constitution neither limits nor conflates the autonomy of the self.

A ‘multi-dimensional’ approach, marked by a keen sense of an ‘existential self’, provides a means of analysis without imposing pre-determined narratives on Hofstadter’s life.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 2010), 359.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works: Ethics - Subjectivity and Truth Vol 1* (London: Penguin, 2000), 291.

³⁸ Jerrold Seigel, *Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

Nonetheless, as an intellectual history, the inevitable focus will be on the reflective element, the action of the self on the self. Kierkegaard raised the issue of the difficulty of finding a 'resting-place' at which a snapshot of life may be taken and life understood.³⁹ The obvious 'resting-place' for a biography of a historian is his published works. My study will take Hofstadter's major published works as its primary focus. Each major work will be analysed with respect to the distinct biographical and contextual circumstances in which it was produced rather than evidence of a later frame of mind.

Life rarely tends to follow a smooth pre-determined trajectory, and Hofstadter's ascent to the pinnacle of the historical profession and influential position within the intellectual life of the nation was not a straightforward one. As Hofstadter suggested when considering his own work in biographical terms: 'Behind every writer there is an individual, a personal history, a series of shaping events.'⁴⁰ The temptation of the biographer to impose narrative unity where none exists risks losing sight of these important individual factors. In considering Hofstadter's work as a process of self-narrative, it is my intention to allow his voice, as heard within his writing, to provide the direction for an assessment of his life and career.

Thomas Soderqvist rightly expresses concern at the tendency of biography to focus on significant events and dealing with the moments rather than life's essential non-drama.⁴¹ However, we must necessarily limit our scope and remain conscious that what we might capture is but a glimpse of a life. In the case of Hofstadter, those glimpses provide rich reward. As Kazin contended, 'No historian...provides a better model of how to approach and write about the past.'⁴² Hofstadter was keenly aware that the role of historical work went beyond that of merely presenting a vision of the past. He concluded his 1956 essay 'History and the Social Sciences' with a summary of

³⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Living Thoughts Of Kierkegaard*, ed. W. H. Auden (New York: NYRB Classics, 1999), 3.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American History," circa 1963, KLRU-TEMP Videotape Collection, Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

⁴¹ Thomas Söderqvist, "Existential Projects and Existential Choice in Science: Science Biography as an Edifying Genre," in *Telling Lives in Science: Essays on Scientific Biography*, ed. Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74.

⁴² Kazin, "Hofstadter Lives," 335.

what he saw as the role of the historian. 'He must see in his own task,' Hofstadter declared, 'as nothing more nor less than a microcosmic representation of the human situation itself.' As he went on, he would go further, casting aside the idea of history as representation and enjoining the reader to think of history as 'not only the analysis but the expression of human experience.' The writing of history was not a simple search for order but an attempt to uncover clues in order that we might discover 'how life...may be felt.'⁴³

⁴³ Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 370.

1**No Place To Go: The Student Years**

The outbreak of World War I initiated a shift in the economic fortunes of many within Buffalo, the city of Hofstadter's birth. The conflict in Europe provided the impetus for a period of massive industrial expansion in the United States and Buffalo became one of the major beneficiaries of the wartime growth. The city's economy, which was dominated by the four key industries of steel, grain, lumber, and rubber, was well placed to take advantage of the crisis. Employment in manufacturing more than doubled in the period between 1914 and 1921, and Buffalo was a city brimming with optimism. The local Chamber of Commerce summed up the feeling of confidence when it proclaimed that the city was set for 'indefinite prosperity.'¹ Emil, Hofstadter's father, arrived in Buffalo just as the city was beginning this period of rapid growth and he was able to establish a profitable fur business on Huron Street, just two blocks from the house he and his wife, Catherine, would make home. The family reaped the rewards of the increased prosperity and displayed many of the signs of their middle-class status. However, the relative security of middle-class life provided little comfort when the young family was visited by tragedy.

In 1926, when Hofstadter was aged only ten, Catherine died of intestinal cancer. There can be few events as significant in the shaping of a young child's mind than that of the death of a parent. With his father unable to care for the children, Hofstadter's distress at losing his mother was compounded by having to leave his home and move in with his grandmother. The move also meant separation from his sister who was sent to live with their aunt Gertrude. H. Stuart Hughes described Catherine's death as 'an absolutely crucial element in Dick's biography,' and the origin of 'the sad cast of his attitude.'² The assertion that the sadness coloured the remainder of his life is arguable. However, his reaction to his mother's death at the time is worthy of consideration. Despite his tender

¹ Mark Goldman, *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York, 1900 - Present* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2007), 83,84.

² H. Stuart Hughes, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, Oral History Research Office (OHRO), Columbia University Library.

years, he seemed determined to exert a degree of control over the emotional impact of the event. His sister, Betty, stated that Hofstadter claimed to have suffered amnesia after the death.³ Rather than psychogenic amnesia, his eradication of the memory seems to have been a conscious endeavour. In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz in 1967, Hofstadter would attest to the fact that he never returned to the memories of this period, as he explained 'his childhood became so difficult... [he] no longer remembers, or cares to remember, much before his high school years.'⁴

At Fosdick-Masten High School, Hofstadter commenced a happier chapter in his life. A gifted athlete and scholar, he excelled both academically and as a sportsman. Interestingly, whilst at high school, he joined a fraternity that was known to exclude Jewish students. On his graduation day, he won virtually all the honours for which he was eligible, including the prestigious Dartmouth Award for outstanding scholarship, character and achievement. His father, who had feared that Hofstadter had put too much emphasis on his sporting activities, was reportedly both surprised and overwhelmed by the young man's academic success.⁵ Whilst not an educated man himself, Emil had impressed on both his children the importance of strong academic performance. In this respect he was typical of first-generation Jewish parents who, as Nathan Glazer wrote, prepared their children for rapid social advancement through educational achievement in the hope that they 'would not also be workers.'⁶ It is not clear how directly involved Emil was with Hofstadter's schooling, but he was undoubtedly keen that his son make the most of his abilities and that he push himself to achieve. Hofstadter surpassed even his father's expectations as his strong academic record resulted in his becoming valedictorian and the award of a state scholarship to study at the University of Buffalo. It is noteworthy that he chose not to make the valedictory address. This is perhaps a first indication of Hofstadter's discomfort with public speaking and preference for expressing his thoughts in the written form. As he

³ Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 11.

⁴ Richard Kostelanetz, *Master Minds*, 67, 168.

⁵ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 14.

⁶ Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, *The Chicago History of American Civilization* (1957; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 80.

explained to one of his students towards the end of his career, 'I do not attach much significance to the spoken word.'⁷

In 1922, Samuel Capen, President of the American Council for Education and renowned educational expert, had been appointed as Buffalo's first full-time Chancellor. The vigorous leadership of Capen and his determination to attract outstanding academic figures ensured that the university was beginning to make significant academic strides by the time Hofstadter commenced study in 1933. In addition to the considerable improvements in the administration and teaching, the university also benefitted from the arrival of a significant number of children, like Hofstadter, of first-generation immigrants. In his inaugural address, Capen had expressed his desire to open up the university to students of all backgrounds and his distaste for quotas. He declared, 'There is but one justifiable basis on which a university in a democratic community such as this can choose those who are to become members of it, the basis of ability.'⁸ The intellectual environment at Buffalo, one which focused on capability of mind over circumstance of birth, provided a fitting home for the talented young Hofstadter.

Whilst the university was thriving, the city of Buffalo was entering a period of crisis. Hofstadter's undergraduate study was completed beneath the gloomy backdrop of the Great Depression. In a lecture towards the end of his career, Hofstadter described how the terrible consequences of the economic crash, and the government's reaction to it, 'got me thinking about the world.'⁹ The Great Depression ravaged the city of Buffalo, which had been a symbol of the strength of the country's manufacturing economy. Primarily reliant on heavy industry, it felt the full and terrible force of the economic crash. By 1932, the number of wage earners had decreased by 30 per cent, average weekly earnings by 17 per cent, and the city had more than one hundred thousand people on the relief roll.¹⁰ It was in this economic context that Hofstadter commenced

⁷ Richard Hofstadter to Richard Kostelanetz, 18 January, 1968, RHP, Box 5 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁸ Samuel P. Capen, "Presidential Address," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 9 (March 1923), 27.

⁹ Hofstadter, "The Great Depression in American History," circa 1963, KLRU-TEMP Videotape Collection.

¹⁰ Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 99,100.

his studies and began to formulate his political views. When he looked back at the period over thirty years later he wrote, 'My mind, in common with others of my generation, was formed on the politics of the depression and the New Deal.' Although largely protected from the worst vicissitudes of the economic collapse, the fact that such deprivation could occur in the United States, could not fail to have an impact on any 'thoughtful and humane person.' Hofstadter summed up the importance of his experience of the Great Depression when he described it as the event 'without which my entire generation is unintelligible.' He, like many, was convinced that America desperately needed political change.¹¹

In political terms, the greater Buffalo area was predominantly conservative and Republican. Congressman Hamilton Fish III, a virulent anti-communist and vocal opponent of Roosevelt's New Deal, represented the congressional district from 1920 to 1945. As Mark Goldman noted, 'Buffalo had never been kind to radicals.'¹² Nonetheless, there was a thriving left-wing political movement, with both the socialist and communist parties having active organizations on campus. One of the key figures within the radical student movement was Hofstadter's future wife, Felice Swados. Two years his senior, she was prominent amongst the Iron Room circle, a group of politically active students who met to discuss the political issues that were exercising the minds of those on the political left. In an atmosphere similar to that of the notorious alcoves of City College, in which the majority of the New York intellectuals honed their debating skills and fashioned their distinctly adversarial style, Felice made her mark and stamped her authority.

The establishment, in 1931, of the National Student League had marked the organizational beginning of student activism in the Depression era. Initially an outgrowth of a local movement gathered around City College in New York City, their radicalism was coloured by a militant, working class vision of domestic and international politics. Such a vision appealed to Felice and her peers in the Iron Room,

¹¹ Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American History."

¹² Goldman, *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 242.

and she was quick to get involved and take the lead when an NSL branch was established at the University of Buffalo.

Initially, the Buffalo chapter worked behind the scenes with other left-wing groups to bring respected speakers such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Max Eastman to the city. However, the 1934/35 academic calendar saw the expansion of their activities and the launch of an independent series of talks. The first meeting in the Fall of 1934 saw twelve new members, one of whom may well have been Hofstadter, attend a talk by the editor of the *New Masses*, and prominent voice of the Communist Party, Michael Gold. Whilst the NSL did not have sole responsibility or control of the political activities of the radical core of students at Buffalo, they were the dominant influence in determining the position to take in the majority of political matters. The NSL itself rarely strayed from the official Communist Party line. Consequently, the coterie of political comrades at Buffalo provided a voice for the Party, both on campus and in the wider student community. Felice fulfilled her activist role with characteristic energy and zeal. As a representative of the NSL chapter of the University of Buffalo at the Intercollegiate Anti-War Conference at Cornell in November 1934, she conducted a seminar on "Education on War." A month later, she headed the Buffalo delegation at the National Conference on Students in Politics in Chicago. By the time Hofstadter met Felice, in the Fall of that year, she had firmly established herself as a leading figure within the university's radical community.¹³

Felice's enthusiasm extended beyond her political activities and her presence was equally felt in academic affairs. Her achievements brought her to the attention of several prominent faculty members, notably her Philosophy professor, Marvin Farber, who would remain an intellectual influence and mentor. Her participation in the discussions within the Philosophy Club were with a passion and knowledge equal to that she displayed in political debate, and it was within these forums that she first came to Hofstadter's attention. It is evident that Felice made an immediate impact on those she met. As Alfred Kazin described his first meeting in 1937, 'I had never met anyone like her...she radiated a hungry self-confidence...I felt happier in her presence, charged with

¹³ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 32,33.

an excitement that I did not try to account for.’¹⁴ As a young man finding his feet both politically and academically, Hofstadter was drawn to Felice’s incredible charisma. Their shared passion for radical politics and drive to succeed academically made them a fitting match. As David Brown has suggested, ‘Two people as intelligent and ambitious as Richard Hofstadter and Felice Swados were bound to find each other on the small Buffalo campus.’¹⁵ Although Felice would soon graduate, their relationship blossomed during their time together at Buffalo.

Hofstadter began to spend considerable time at the Swados home. He was drawn both to the comfort of the family home and the enthusiasm and understanding with which intellectual and social concerns were freely debated. It is likely that the death of his own mother might have played some role in his strong attachment to the Swados family. However, more importantly he felt a sense of cultural identification. The association with what Daniel Bell described as the ‘Buffalo crowd’ precipitated his ‘moving steadily further and further toward the Jewish side of himself.’¹⁶ As he settled into life as a student at the University of Buffalo, Hofstadter encountered a vibrant and creative Jewish intellectual culture and he immediately felt a sense of kinship. The Swados family became an extension of the wider social milieu of which he had become a part, and played an important role in a period when Hofstadter was formulating his identity.

Given Felice’s involvement in student politics, it was inevitable that their relationship would coincide with greater participation for Hofstadter. Whilst Brown has suggested that ‘he was never fully immersed,’ his activities during his time at university and indeed in the following years show he was very much engaged with radical politics.¹⁷ It was in his final year in Buffalo, one without Felice, who had taken up a fellowship at Smith College, that Hofstadter would take on the role of president of the local NSL chapter. For a young student who was becoming steadily more involved in political activism, the period was an immensely exciting one. The change in Communist Party strategy to one of alliance with anti-fascist groups prompted a review of NSL tactics, and Hofstadter, as

¹⁴ Alfred Kazin, *Starting out in the Thirties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 99.

¹⁵ David Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 13.

¹⁶ Daniel and Pearl Bell, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

¹⁷ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 12.

president, would have been responsible for forging new alliances and increasing student awareness. Neither task was particularly straightforward. Despite the period being one marked by the intensity of its political debate and the polarity of the competing visions of the future, the majority of students at Buffalo were apathetic. Harold Laski made the point in his 1931 essay, 'The Political Indifference of the American Undergraduate,' when he bemoaned the fact that 'the idea that citizenship involves on his part an active interest in [political affairs] does not...occur to him.'¹⁸ This indifference was particularly pronounced at Buffalo.

The predominance of the business administration curriculum at Buffalo meant that the majority of students saw their college years as preparation for the world of commerce. Their role models, and those they viewed as the shapers of American society, came not from the world of politics, but from industry. Much to Hofstadter's chagrin, political illiteracy did not prevent some of his peers making political pronouncements in the student paper. One such statement, in which the correspondent took issue with the size of the welfare bill, prompted a vexed response from Hofstadter. In a letter of November 1, 1935 to the campus paper, *The Bison*, Hofstadter wrote, 'the suggestion that there is parasitism in modern society is not without its merit, but it is obvious that the writer has not sought it in the right place...why pick on the unfortunate? Human suffering is not funny...Why not a satire on the superficial American college student?'¹⁹ Whilst Hofstadter was not alone in his political views and concern for those worst affected by the Depression, it seemed that, amongst his student peers, his was a minority view.

In spite of the political indifference of his fellow students, Hofstadter did see some success during his presidency of the NSL. He arranged a well-received visit by Celeste Strack, who had been expelled from UCLA for her campus radicalism. Her speech struck a chord when she spoke of apathy being 'the most alarming of all tendencies on college campuses.' Perhaps most significantly, Hofstadter, as co-chairman of the Committee for Peace Mobilization, helped organize a joint demonstration with other student groups, to address the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the threat of war. With an attendance of

¹⁸ Harold Laski, "Why Don't Your Young Men Care?" *The Harpers Monthly*, July 1931, 129.

¹⁹ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 52.

almost four hundred students, the event was considered a triumph for the organisers. The debate and subsequent vote on whether to endorse the Oxford Pledge, an expression of opposition to all war, led to a less successful outcome. Hofstadter, who generally shied away from making public pronouncements, argued for acceptance of the pledge on the basis that America's security meant that any engagement in war would be for purely economic reasons. The students, although happy to march for peace, were less willing to vote against war, and the pledge was defeated by 335 votes to 40. It remained clear to Hofstadter that he and his closest friends remained on the margins of student opinion.²⁰

The demonstration prompted several articles in the student paper, *The Buffalo Bee*, which criticized the organisers for exaggerating the threat of war and using the event to stir up political agitation. In response, representatives of the NSL wrote a letter to the editors outlining the primary concerns of the student left. The authors outlined their key concerns as being those of student fees, pacifism and anti-Fascism. Perhaps more surprisingly, the letter explicitly denied any link with the Communist Party. Baker makes the point that it is significant that Hofstadter did not choose to respond on behalf of the NSL, and that he did not sign the statement.²¹ The intimation is that Hofstadter was unwilling to disavow the influence of the Communist Party. Whilst this may have played some part in his public silence on the issue, the suggestion that he wished to remain detached and to allow other voices to be heard is likely to be closer to the truth. He often preferred to remain on the periphery, rather than at the forefront, of the debate. Kazin summed up this tendency when he explained that Hofstadter 'took things in, he thought them over and waited them out; he let other people take the initiative.'²² He also maintained, throughout his life, a great reticence to sign public statements with which he did not agree unequivocally. Indeed, his acceptance of the role of president was somewhat out of character. As Bell noted, 'he was not a joiner... he never really became involved personally in many organizations.'²³ His decision to serve is indicative of the strength of his political convictions.

²⁰ Ibid., 51–53.

²¹ Ibid., 55.

²² Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties*, 100.

²³ Daniel and Pearl Bell, *Richard Hofstadter Project*.

Aside from his political activities, Hofstadter continued his strong academic record at Buffalo. The increased investment in the teaching budget during Capen's administration meant that Hofstadter benefitted from the tutelage of several notable academic figures during his time as an undergraduate. Hofstadter later stated that 'the big influence on me there was my teacher...Julius Pratt. He is a thoroughly professional historian...and a wonderful teacher.'²⁴ Pratt was considered a model of historical detachment, his writing based on thorough research and his conclusions always considered and bounded by the evidence at hand. Whilst Hofstadter described him as the sort of historian, 'which I think I'll never be,' his influence was significant both in these formative years and beyond.

Hofstadter took four courses with Pratt during his time at Buffalo, one of which was 'Territorial Expansion of the US', a course based on his research for his 1936 book, *The Expansionists of 1898*.²⁵ These lectures, and the subsequent published work, made an obvious impression on Hofstadter. It is significant that Pratt's interpretation was a direct challenge to the economic model set out by the Progressive writers, particularly Beard's assertion that the Spanish-American War had been driven by big business's desire for expanded markets. Pratt contended that business sentiment had, on the whole, been opposed to the war, and that the driving factors had been social and psychological. His study of the impact of ideas and belief systems on foreign policy, and the therapeutic value of political decision-making offered an alternative interpretation of the American past. Whilst Beard remained a role model for the young Hofstadter, Pratt's challenge to the Progressive model and awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of political motive proved instrumental in Hofstadter's development. Pratt's work, much as Hofstadter's would, engaged with contemporary concerns, and as the nation discussed the possibility of war, his study of the motives behind foreign policy was remarkably pertinent. As a passionate non-interventionist, he spoke out in favour of a trade embargo against all nations engaged in war at the student demonstration for peace, and contributed several polemical essays to the student newspaper.²⁶ His

²⁴ David Hawke, "Interview: Richard Hofstadter," *History*, 3 (1960), 140.

²⁵ Julius William Pratt, *Expansionists of 1898; the Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936).

²⁶ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 53; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 15.

influence on Hofstadter was felt both as a teacher, and through his campaigning, as a model of the engaged intellectual.

Despite his obvious aptitude for history, Hofstadter stated that as an undergraduate he was 'more interested in philosophy than history.'²⁷ Both he and Felice were active members of the Philosophy Club and both formed a close bond with the head of the Philosophy Department, Marvin Farber. As a teacher, Farber had 'an air of personal warmth often verging on a fatherly affection,' and he was a source of great support for the young couple in their early careers. During his graduate study, Farber had spent two years in Germany, at Berlin and Freiburg, where he studied under Edward Husserl. Husserl's teaching had a profound impact on Farber and he devoted his career to the exposition of Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology. Farber's own teaching was characterized by his opposition to idealism and insistence that philosophy be seen as 'an intellectual activity which is rooted in given social frameworks and which is comprehensible in historical terms.' His marriage of radical empiricism and historicism appealed to Hofstadter and provided a framework for the combination of his nascent Marxism and historical study.²⁸

As several key members of the Philosophy Club came to the end of their time at Buffalo, Hofstadter took up the role of co-chairman. However, despite his obvious interest in philosophy and desire to remain active within the circle, he made the decision to drop the subject and to major solely in history. He later explained that 'I was astute enough to see I had no gifts in the field and jobs for philosophers were harder to come by.'²⁹ As Hofstadter was shifting his focus to the study of History, Felice was preparing to commence postgraduate study in Philosophy at Smith College. The award of a prestigious Trustee Fellowship was indicative of her academic ability, and all the more remarkable given the fact she was in competition with students across all subjects and from some of the nation's leading universities. It is not insignificant that her achievement in obtaining the fellowship coincided with Hofstadter's decision not to

²⁷ Hawke, "Interview," 140.

²⁸ Kah Kyung Cho and Lynn E. Rose, "Obituary: Marvin Farber (1901-1980)," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42 (September 1, 1981), 3.

²⁹ Hawke, "Interview," 140.

pursue his studies in Philosophy. Elizabeth Earley, who would meet the couple some five years later, recalled how Hofstadter went through periods of despondency due to Felice's intensely competitive nature and desire 'to beat [him] at his own game.'³⁰ Kazin also noted that Felice 'was probably the first to recognize just how brilliant he was and fought him on it.'³¹ Perhaps his decision to concentrate on History can be viewed as an attempt to separate their interests and distinguish himself in a field of study in which Felice had not already excelled and in which she would not seek to compete. His easy-going disposition and strong aversion to conflict meant that he sometimes struggled with Felice's combative character. Nevertheless, the period of enforced separation as Felice moved to Northampton seems to have strengthened their relationship, and the couple began to formulate plans for life after graduation. Hofstadter applied to law school, and they made the decision to get married and move to New York upon completion of their studies.

As Felice worked on her M.A. thesis on the history of materialism, Hofstadter commenced work on his senior tutorial thesis, entitled, 'The Tariff and Homestead Issues in the Republican Campaign of 1860.' An investigation of the Beards' interpretation of the causes of the Civil War, the thesis aimed to interrogate the evidence for the contention that the war had been economically motivated. The Beards had contended that the 'Second American Revolution' was a 'social cataclysm in which the capitalists, laborers, and farmers of the North and West drove from power...the planting aristocracy of the South' in order that they might gain commercial advantage. As Hofstadter suggested, 'If the economic causes...are held to have been effective...it follows that these issues were consciously desired, consciously fought for, by the participants.' His study set out to test the veracity of the Beards' conclusion by focusing primarily on how two key economic factors, the Homestead Bill and the tariff, 'affected the mind of people of the North.' In his choice of subject and his desire to search for nuance and ambiguity in the motives of both the parties and the voters, we see the influence of his mentor, Julius Pratt. Yet as he would admit later, Beard was 'really the exciting influence on me' as an undergraduate, and although critical, his thesis remained

³⁰ Elizabeth Earley, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

³¹ Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 16.

framed by the parameters of the economic interpretation. Later published, in shortened version, in the *American Historical Review*, the work anticipated a career-long engagement with Progressive historiography.³²

The study itself was written in a scholarly, detached style, much like that of Pratt, and far removed from the literary flair of his later work. His treatment of the congressional debates and the voting patterns was both logical and deductive, a method owing much to his philosophical training and his mentor's model of historical objectivity. It is also interesting to note, and somewhat ironic given later criticisms of his own work, that he castigated the Beards' work for it being 'not a thoroughly documented exposition.' He went on to write that, 'The evidences adduced, however striking they may seem...will not be accepted as definitive proofs.'³³ With regards to his own study, he makes it clear that it is restricted almost entirely to secondary evidence. The evidence he uncovered led him to conclude that the homestead issue was decisive and that 'the burden of proof now rests more heavily' in support of the Beards' interpretation.³⁴ However, whilst Hofstadter, both due to his acceptance of the Progressive model and his left-wing political views, saw politics as being pervaded by economic interest, he retained a sense of the complexity of the relationship between economic issues and political attitudes. Hofstadter devoted considerable time to analysing the changing attitudes of the immigrant population in the northwestern states and their central importance in Lincoln's electoral victory.³⁵ Their association with both political parties belied the crude correlation of the economic and political. Whilst the thesis remained broadly within the framework established by Beard, Hofstadter's 'first critical act', as he would later describe it, was informed by an opposition to simple determinism and a Marxian sense of the irony of history.³⁶

³² Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1927), 53; Richard Hofstadter, "The Tariff and Homestead Issues in the Republican Campaign of 1860", Senior Tutorial Thesis, University of Buffalo, May 1936, RHP, Box 31.

³³ Hofstadter, "The Tariff and Homestead Issues," iii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, iv.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-31.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 27-31; Hawke, "Interview," 141

By the time both he and Felice had submitted their theses, they had made plans to get married and move to New York. However, news of their intention to marry was not well received by either of their families. The roots of Emil's dislike of Felice are unclear but the Swados' family concerns regarding Hofstadter are easier to discern. Her mother wrote her with a list of reasons for ending her relationship, 'the most numerous and most prominent ones...relating to Dick's father [and] to Dick's character.'³⁷ The reason for the Swados' dislike for Emil is not stated, but it can be assumed that his lapsed Judaism and the fact that he had married a non-Jew, together with his social status, meant that they were not keen to invite him into their family. As for Hofstadter, they held out little hope that he would attain a degree of success befitting the husband of their daughter. Despite his academic success, his choice to study a non-professional degree was frowned upon. Interestingly, Felice seemed to have shared some of her parents' negative assessments of Hofstadter's future prospects. In response to her mother's letter, she wrote her brother Harvey, that 'I am only too aware of Dick's faults...If he is slow, and obedient, and impractical, it is not his fault.'³⁸ Despite her rather patronizing defence of her future husband, the marriage plans continued, and in the Fall of 1936 the couple left Buffalo to be married in New York.

The pair had immersed themselves in radical politics during their time in Buffalo and the move to New York, the centre of the radical movement, filled them with excitement. The small student circle of which they had been members during their university years had provided them with a sense of the intellectual vibrancy and political possibility of the movement. As they settled into their small apartment in Brooklyn, two blocks from the docks, they soon found themselves part of a new and exhilarating community of like-minded young intellectuals and militants. The marriage of worker and thinker, the dream of the radical movement, was a reality in New York, and the couple opened their home to sailors and intellectuals alike. Their passion and brilliance, combined with their enthusiastic political commitment made a considerable impression on those they encountered. Indeed, their impact was described as being 'like a fine gold over the staid

³⁷ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, March 5, 1936, Harvey Swados Papers (HSP), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Box 31. All future references to HSP refer to Box 31 within the collection.

³⁸ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, March 19, 1936, HSP.

brownstones of Brooklyn Heights.³⁹ However, whilst they had established a position within the radical community, the exigencies of life in the city dictated that they also find a place in the external world.

Hofstadter, who was mindful of the need to establish himself in a career, and under instruction from his father and uncle Samuel, enrolled at Columbia Law School. His decision to study law was not one made with any degree of passion for the subject. His uncle, recently appointed State Supreme Court Judge, found Hofstadter a job as a clerk in the office of his friend, Irving Kaufman, Assistant U.S. Attorney. The combination of working in the law firm by day and studying by night, was both arduous and uninteresting. In the early months, he publicly hid his lack of enthusiasm, writing Harvey in September 1936, that 'Law School is delightful.'⁴⁰ The commencement of his studies had ensured that his move to New York was with the blessing of his father, but once there he quickly sought to find an alternative path to that which had been planned for him. Two months prior to his letter to Harvey, he had already confided in Marvin Farber that 'I am contemplating changing my course altogether in the following year and pursuing an academic career – that is, if I can land a suitable fellowship in New York. There is a possibility of a placement in history.'⁴¹ Whilst Hofstadter was yet to make the decision to pursue a career within the historical profession, he had clearly resolved that law was not to be his vocation.

Whilst Hofstadter remained uncertain about his future career plans, Felice was clear in her intention to carry her political commitment into her working life. After short periods with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the YWCA, she joined the YCL branch of the National Maritime Union as a membership secretary and later became the editor of the political newsletter. The role gave her a sense of being actively involved at the heart of the struggle against capitalism, but failed to provide the intellectual stimulation that she desired. It was at home that she was able to express her creativity, and she spent her evenings writing, both collaboratively with Hofstadter and

³⁹ Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties*, 101

⁴⁰ Richard and Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, September 22, 1936, HSP.

⁴¹ Richard Hofstadter to Marvin Farber, July 30, 1936, Marvin Farber Papers, University Archives, The State University of New York at Buffalo, Box 9, Folder 3.

independently. Alongside plays and a series of stories centred on the life of a sailor, she wrote poems that were submitted to *New Masses* and *Poetry*. However, her drive to succeed and wish to play a fuller role in the intellectual life of the city meant that she did not long remain content to limit her creativity to the few hours between work and sleep. In addition, the cost of living in New York was a constant strain on the modest income that the couple received in their respective jobs, and Felice held out little hope of Hofstadter establishing himself in a successful career. In a letter to her brother, she rather scornfully wrote, 'Dick has been tossed around by some legal suit...He will probably become a house-painter or counter boy.'⁴² Her own ambitions led her to apply for a position at *Time*, and she was successful in obtaining a position as a researcher for the medical column. Although the role pleased her parents, she herself was ambivalent. Whilst she saw the chance of promotion through the ranks and the ability to express herself creatively in a major publication, she was also disgusted by the corporate and conservative nature of the organization. Nonetheless, within months she had taken the column writer's position and, despite her continuing sense of guilt, began to reap the financial rewards of her success.

It was shortly after Felice joined *Time* that Hofstadter made the decision to make public his dissatisfaction with law school and to end his studies. His uncle Samuel, who had secured him a position as a clerk in his own law firm, took the news particularly badly. Indeed, he refused to speak to Richard for twelve years, only resuming contact in the wake of the success of *The American Political Tradition*. According to his sister, Betty, his father took the news a little better. Although he was obviously disappointed that his son had turned his back on what was seen as a secure career, he informed Richard that he wished only that he 'could afford to support him as a scholar.'⁴³ For the Swados family, the decision added further evidence that Richard was unlikely to amount to much and was wholly unsuitable for their talented daughter. In a side note to a letter from Felice to her brother, she asked for his support, as 'D is leaving law school + there's hell to pay.'⁴⁴

⁴² Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d., HSP.

⁴³ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 76.

⁴⁴ Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, January 25, 1937, HSP.

Hofstadter determined that he would make light of both the enormity of his decision and the opprobrium displayed by his in-laws. In times of stress and discord, it was typical of Hofstadter to respond with a sense of comedy, rather than hostility. It was also characteristic that he chose to address the issue with pen in hand rather than in person. He drew up a wanted poster, entitled 'Deadeye Dick', and sent it to Harvey. The poster offered 100,000 dollars for the arrest of 'Dick the Dip', 'wanted for fraud, arson, battery, mayhem, perjury, rape, treason, murder and passing a red light in crowded traffic.'⁴⁵ The obvious jibe was that, to Harvey's parents, Hofstadter's failure to complete his law qualification was seen as the most heinous of crimes. Months later, as the ill-feeling continued to simmer, he penned a surreal letter in which he told the story of 'a tall, gawky blond man without a moustache' entering their home at 134 Montague Street, to implement a 'vile plot against the female occupant.' The devious plan was to infect the bed with a pregnant bedbug in an attempt to so discomfort Felice that she would leave. The bedbug obviously signified the loss of income that her parents foresaw as a result of Hofstadter's decision to turn his back on law school. In the letter, addressed to both Felice's brother and parents, he explains that he 'was trying to drive her out' but that she 'has given incontestable proof that she intends to stick to me no matter what happens.' In conclusion, he addressed the issue of his leaving law school and of his intention to enrol as a History graduate student. He declared, 'I swear by the beard of Allah, that I am getting my M.A....And if I will not somehow become a journalist, I will become an historian...Anything but a lawyer!.'⁴⁶ The decision to study history had caused considerable resentment, but Hofstadter was clear that he was determined in his choice and that he had the support of his wife.

The constant throughout these early months of change was the couple's political involvement. Hofstadter's relationship with the Communist Party and radicalism was not representative of those intellectuals with whom he has become associated. He did not start out in a blaze of political fervour that would later be extinguished by the news of events in Stalinist Russia and the inevitable crisis of conscience amongst intellectuals

⁴⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d., HSP.

⁴⁶ Hofstadter to Aaron, Harvey, and Rivi Swados, June 24, 1937, HSP.

that followed. From the beginning, his views were based on rigorous analysis of the issues at stake and his political position was carefully calculated. Nonetheless, despite his desire to formulate his own opinions and his reticence to commit to Party membership, it is evident that Hofstadter's views on world events were from a vantage point within the wider sphere of the Communist Party. His childhood experiences in Buffalo at the height of the Depression, together with his growing involvement in student radical organisations, had ensured that he arrived in New York with an acute dissatisfaction with the economic and political system. His distaste for the structures of American society was further strengthened, both by the friendships and affiliations he made in the city, and the daily spectacle of the system he so despised at its zenith. His work as a legal clerk took him to the very heart of the financial district and seems to have elicited a strong sense of indignation. After one such day on Wall Street, he wrote Harvey, 'I still hate this goddam stinking son of a bitch of a filthy capitalist system.'⁴⁷ In his hatred of capitalism, Hofstadter reflected the dominant mood amongst the young intellectuals of his generation. Nevertheless, Hofstadter tarried long over entry to the Party.

The period immediately after the move to New York was one charged with political significance. The pace of world events precipitated immense political and intellectual change, particularly amongst those on the political left. Hofstadter's correspondence with Harvey Swados proffers an illuminating glimpse into his relationship to the radical political debates of the day. Both domestic politics and the unfolding situation in Europe were the subject of close logical analysis and heated debate. However, there were also periodic moments of reflection on the futility of intellectual discussion and of the requirement to act, rather than simply to discuss. This struggle between the determination to act in the world and an innate hesitancy to commit, particularly to a course of action that's consequences were impossible to divine, was a constant source of angst for the young Hofstadter. The problem of finding balance between these competing desires appeared an intractable one, a Gordian knot with which Hofstadter struggled throughout these early years. Significantly, his attempt to solve the conundrum did not cease with his disengagement from radical politics, but continued to

⁴⁷ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d. [late 1936], HSP.

inform his life and work, throughout his career. His desire, and unparalleled ability, to bring the past to bear on the present, and to participate in contemporary debates through the medium of his work, was central to his success, both popular and professional. The written word, particularly in the form of the historical exegesis, would eventually provide Hofstadter with a means of unravelling the knot that had earlier confounded him.

The growing strength of the Nazi Party in Germany, the obliteration of political opposition, and the seemingly inevitable expansion beyond its national borders, prompted the Communist Party to reappraise its tactics. The magnitude of the change in Party direction is nowhere more evident than in the proceedings of the American Writers' Congresses of 1935 and 1937. In January 1935 the call was made to writers who 'recognize the necessity of personally helping to accelerate the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' government.' Just two years later, at the 1937 congress, both capitalism and revolutionary writing had been omitted from the call. As Philip Rahv noted, 'If that first call summoned writers to the struggle against imperialist war and fascism, the second contented itself with a timorous meliorism.' The subject of class struggle had been replaced with an appeal for collaboration and a focus on trade unionism rather than revolution. Rahv described the overriding message as one of defending 'what we already possess, namely, our bountiful bourgeois democracy.' To many on the left it appeared that the needs of the proletariat had become secondary to the immediate needs of the party, and that the role of the activist as a revolutionary voice had been silenced.⁴⁸

The intellectual disputes within the Communist movement were at their most evident in New York, and provide the backdrop for Hofstadter's own involvement with the party. Although, politically, he was yet to establish his position with respect to the party, Hofstadter had a greater affinity with intellectuals like Rahv than to the party faithful. The rigidity of thought amongst the members and the local party's deference to Russia was at odds with what Hofstadter saw as the requirements of a truly revolutionary

⁴⁸ Philip Rahv, "Two Years of Progress – From Waldo Frank to Donald Ogden Stuart", *Partisan Review*, 4 (February 1938), 22-30.

organization. This was no more so the case than in the United States where the 'fact of dictation of policy from Moscow assures that the best type of leader will be driven out...and that mediocrities will be in control.'⁴⁹ From the beginning, Hofstadter had a degree of apprehension about active engagement with the party. However, like many of his peers, there seemed few alternatives. As Phillips, speaking of his indecision over leaving the party, explained, 'it seemed...the only party capable of doing anything...of providing some kind of central force around which to organize.'⁵⁰ For a young radical like Hofstadter, the Communist Party, despite its faults, seemed like the only party that offered a solution to the nation's ills.

Hofstadter's regular correspondence with Swados served as an ongoing debate on the issues that were exercising the minds of those both within the party and those associated with it. The written form provided a means of presenting his analysis and delineating his views on party strategy, both domestically and beyond. Within the letters, the detailed critiques of the progress of the Spanish Civil War and the activity in France give clear indication of Hofstadter's keen interest and concern with the tactics of the party internationally. The Moscow Trials, which commenced in the summer of 1936 with the indictment of sixteen of 'the firstborn of October', including the absent Leon Trotsky, served to create an irreparable split in the party. The fragmentary reports of the trials caused much uncertainty, soul-searching and confusion within communist circles. Hofstadter was amongst those who struggled to come to terms with the news and the events became a constant subject of discussion in his letters. In early March 1937, he wrote Harvey, 'As for the trials, I tried to convince myself that they were kosher and at one point succeeded, but my conscience bothers me.'⁵¹ The veracity of the trials continued to occupy his thoughts throughout the year and he remained equivocal regarding the guilt of the accused. In November 1937 he returned to discussion of the trials, and wrote, 'Poisonally, I am by no means convinced that they were innocent, mistake me not...I proved... that there is no possible basis of approach to the trials

⁴⁹ Hofstadter to Swados, October 17, 1937, HSP.

⁵⁰ Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 96.

⁵¹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 1937, HSP.

except on the assumption that the confessions were bona fide.⁵² Despite his sense that the confessions were authentic, he conceded that the internal evidence contradicted the professions of guilt and the idea of a concerted plot continued to remain improbable. Whilst Hofstadter's ambivalence regarding the trials may be indicative of his own characteristic reticence to pronounce judgment without full knowledge of the facts, he was not alone at this time.

As the trials extended into 1938, the battle lines between those who accepted the Soviet interpretation and those who believed the events to have been a cynical attempt by Stalin to consolidate his power became more firmly drawn.

By early 1938, Hofstadter seems to be in little doubt regarding the falsity of the confessions made during the trials. A letter to Swados in January gives a wonderful insight into Hofstadter's sense of contrition, and his displeasure at having been mistaken in his initial verdict. These feelings were further compounded by the perception that Swados had used the opportunity to question Hofstadter's lack of judgment. The inference was that Hofstadter had previously failed to heed his counsel regarding the veracity of the trials. It is evident that he resented the suggestion that he had needed Swados' guidance to reach his conclusion. Fiercely independent of mind, the intimation provoked an angry retort. In response, Hofstadter declared, 'I wrote you sometime ago that the trials were phony and the recent purges were frame ups.' He proceeded to remind Swados that he, like Hofstadter, had 'fallen for what was at the time, and now is, a pretty palpable phony.' Although piqued, Hofstadter characteristically injected humour into an exchange that might otherwise have led to friction between them. After suggesting that Swados might, like he, do penance every night for having been duped, he reminded him that penance 'has ABSOLUTELY nothing to do with masturbation.' Yet, despite his acceptance of his error of judgment, it is telling that Hofstadter concluded his discussion of the trials by reiterating the fact that the logic he had applied to his analysis still held strong, irrespective of it bearing no relation to the reality of events.⁵³

⁵² Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, November 7, 1937, HSP.

⁵³ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, January 20, 1938, HSP.

In light of the failure of logic to determine the validity of the trials, Hofstadter began to doubt the efficacy or credibility of mere thought and discussion in the face of such momentous political events. He felt that his position on the periphery of the party meant that his opinions lacked both legitimacy and a firm grounding in political reality. In January 1938, he wrote Swados, 'I am no longer sure that my views are of sufficient importance to you or the world at large to warrant expressing them.' In the correspondence of the period, it is discernible that he is wrestling with his own decision to remain outside the party. His concerns regarding the tactics and rhetoric of the party, particularly the contradiction between the Popular Front strategy and classical Leninism, made it difficult to commit. Nonetheless, he had to concede that the palpable threat of fascism meant that the world might no longer conform to the Leninist interpretation. His ambivalence regarding the party was summed up as he wrote, 'I don't like a lot of the things that the party does here...Fact remains, while I would never join the party, it's best to work along CI lines for the time being and shut up about what you don't like.' However, this position of 'shutting up' was not one that sat easily with Hofstadter. Caught between the desire to subject all political actions to rigorous scrutiny and a sense of the futility of mere 'talk', he began to move towards the party.⁵⁴

As Hofstadter was considering his association with the party, Felice's increasingly active involvement is likely to have exerted some influence on his thoughts. Kazin, who had been introduced to Felice as an authority on communism by a Stalinist friend, described the radical energy that emanated from the Hofstadters' apartment in Brooklyn Heights. 'There were sailors all over the place,' he wrote, and the atmosphere was marked by a 'wildness that radiated from the militants...who seemed always...in attendance.'⁵⁵ Felice, surrounded by 'real people', revelled in the authenticity of the experience. Kazin's description of the couple in these early years in New York not only illuminates their differing characters, but may also go some way to explaining how this impacted on their engagement with radical politics. Whilst Felice used the gatherings at Montague Street as an opportunity to instruct her guests on political tactics and scientific materialism, Hofstadter entertained with his skills in mimicry. This is not to suggest that Hofstadter

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kazin, *Starting out in the Thirties*, 100.

did not engage in the political debate. As is evident in his correspondence with Swados, he was whole-heartedly committed to the principles of Marxism and took great interest in the party's tactics. There is an element of truth in Kazin's description of Hofstadter as 'a natural conservative in a radical period.'⁵⁶ However, rather than political conservatism, Hofstadter's careful consideration was indicative of his perpetual awareness of the complexity of the issues and of the contingency of ideas.

Felice's active commitment ensured Hofstadter was very much at the heart of the communist movement. He often accompanied her to YCL meetings and in March 1938 he joined a communist party meeting of the Columbia graduate unit, writing Swados that he 'wanted to see how they function.' It is noteworthy that the report of his attendance was prefaced by his reiteration that he had no intention of joining the party. He seems to have been impressed by their organization. However, his misgivings regarding the rigidity of thought and lack of critical voices within the party were confirmed. He had hoped that a unit affiliated with Columbia University might provide a forum for dissenting voices within the party. The realization that this was not the case caused him obvious dismay. He summed up his experience by writing, 'I was appalled at their attitude of mind...The underlying assumption...is that the party can't be wrong. This from intellectuals...Fuck the intellectuals!!' It seemed evident at this time that a party that proscribed dissent could not serve as a congenial home for someone who attached such value to independence of thought.⁵⁷

Surprisingly, just one month after expressing his misgivings about the experience at the Columbia meeting, Hofstadter, despite his reservations, joined the Party. In a letter dated April 30, 1938, Hofstadter described the reasons for his apparent reversal of position. He explained, 'My entrance into the party is not the result of any change of mind. I join without enthusiasm but with a sense of obligation.' It is apparent that his doubts regarding the party remained, and his decision was not wholly a happy one. Like so many of his peers, there was a profound sense that the battle lines had been drawn, and the stark decision was whether one was for or against capitalism. Hofstadter was

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁷ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 8, 1938, HSP.

certain on which side of the divide he sat, writing, 'My fundamental reason for joining is that I don't like capitalism and want to get rid of it.' In the fight against capitalism, the communist party appeared to be the only party that offered real resistance. Yet, the fact that the party, under Browder's leadership, was following a policy of cooperation with Roosevelt's New Deal government, seemed to belie its oppositional credentials. For Hofstadter, like many of his peers, the Popular Front strategy was acceptable only as a temporary measure to help halt the threat of fascism. In addition, it was hoped that the alliance with progressives would facilitate the radicalization of certain sections of the petit bourgeoisie that had traditionally remained outside the orbit of the party. The question of the party losing its revolutionary character was a real cause for concern, but for the moment, it was one that Hofstadter suggested could be postponed.⁵⁸

The decision to join the party had long been a matter of consideration for Hofstadter. Nonetheless, his apparent change of mind regarding membership, in the weeks after his encounter with the Columbia graduate unit, appears uncharacteristically swift. Whilst sudden, it is evident that the commitment was not made with full conviction. Despite his attempts to rationalize the decision to join, his native circumspection and sense of doubt are palpable in his final words. He appealed to Swados, 'If you think I'm nuts about the party...please say so.' It is unlikely that Hofstadter was seeking validation. Rather, one gets the impression that he is exhorting Swados to convince him of his error. Hofstadter's sense of obligation to join the party had begun to weigh heavier on his conscience than his long-standing reservations. However, the balance was fine, and it would not be long until his misgivings, once again, would prove too strong to remain.⁵⁹

Of the factors that had propelled Hofstadter towards his membership of the party, the strongest was his growing sense of guilt at his lack of political activity. 'I am tired of talking. I am ashamed of the hours jawing about the thing,' he explained to Swados. His decision to join the party was indicative of a newfound regard for the primacy of action and a growing sense of conflict between thought and deed. This changed attitude was summed up in his analysis of the debate between isolationism and collective security.

⁵⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, April 30, 1938, HSP.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Whilst he admitted that he was ambivalent about the topic and that both paths would eventually lead to America's entry into the war, collective security seemed to be better 'practical politics'. Given that he saw the issue as one worthy only of discussion from a practical point of view, he had forsaken his earlier isolationism. Key to his shift of opinion is his statement that, 'For those who have no intention of DOING anything after they have come to their conclusion, isolationism serves very well.' In these first few months of 1938, we see Hofstadter doubting the position of the radical intellectual as one who can remain pure of thought and outside the grubby world of real politics. Whilst a certain course of action might appeal on purely intellectual grounds, its validity should be measured against more pragmatic concerns.⁶⁰

In many ways Hofstadter's movement towards a more active engagement with radicalism, and the consequential shift of perspective regarding the political issues of the time, presaged his disillusionment with the politics of the Communist Party. Hofstadter's decision to set aside intellectual concerns and become a hard-edged politico did not come naturally. Whilst his typically measured approach to political debate had led him to inactivity, his greater involvement led ultimately to pessimism and frustration. Soon after joining the party, he would be faced with the realization that the reality of revolutionary politics was less heartening than it may have appeared from without. Yet he seems, at least temporarily, willing to play a role in the fight. He would write in May 1938 that 'there isn't going to be any revolution here...I share your nostalgia for the old days. But you will acknowledge that nostalgia like most sentiments, has no political validity.'⁶¹ Hofstadter's pragmatic response suggests both an acceptance of the Communist Party's new strategy and a determination to limit his analysis to the practice of politics rather than the principles. To some degree, this shift in perspective mirrored Felice's position on party politics. A month prior to Hofstadter's joining the party, she had written her brother, 'Things have changed...you have got to accept a certain amount of dictatorship for expediency's sake.'⁶² Her loyalty to the party was made clear when she informed Swados that 'I'm even beginning to understand the

⁶⁰ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 12, 1938, HSP.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 30, 1938, HSP.

trials...you must have unified rule...opposition must be killed at once.’⁶³ Hofstadter was not so unequivocal in his support for the party leadership. However, he does appear willing, at least temporarily, to suspend his critical faculties in the interests of party loyalty.

There is little discussion of Hofstadter’s activities during his short sojourn in the Communist Party. A sole mention in a letter from May 1938, states, ‘We went to the party convention, which I found dull.’⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that he mentions only his own boredom. Felice’s membership of the party pre-dated his and her correspondence suggests that she was more willing to accept the party line and the dictates of the leadership. The intellectual sterility of the party and the hostility towards those who voiced an alternative viewpoint, proved harder to tolerate for Hofstadter. By as early as October 1938, the appeal of active involvement in politics was beginning to wane. In response to a letter from Swados, he bemoaned the fact that he ‘had to revive politics, of which I am sick even tho there is nothing quite so important.’⁶⁵ In a period so crowded with events of political significance, it was impossible to sequester oneself outside the battle. The mood was so vividly described by Rahv: ‘We are beginning to live from hour to hour, awaiting the change of headlines.’⁶⁶ With the quickening pace of events emerged more pressing political questions, and with these questions came the need for action. For Hofstadter, it was a time of great personal turmoil, as he wrestled with the desire to act and the uncertainty regarding the tactics of the party, and his own position within it.

The letter to Swados provides further insight into Hofstadter’s continuing ambivalence regarding party membership and the mental anguish caused by his incertitude. He restated his reason for joining and his sense that the right to comment on politics should be reserved for those willing to act. He explained, ‘Early this yr I joined up with Stalin’s gang because I do not think that anyone is justified in perpetual gabble about this class struggle...without any serious intention of doing something about it.’ His own reticence

⁶³ Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, April 1938, HSP.

⁶⁴ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 29, 1938, HSP.

⁶⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 1938, HSP.

⁶⁶ Philip Rahv, “Trials of the Mind.” *Partisan Review*, 4 (April 1938), 3.

to become involved in active politics had led to a period of self-reflection. He expressed concerns that his desire to remain on the periphery and to criticize the tactics of the party from without 'were just rationalizations of my penchant for inactivity.' This negative self-assessment of his motives had prompted him to re-evaluate his position, as he concluded, 'I don't like to be that sort of person.' It's difficult to determine whether Hofstadter believed that his circumspection had been borne of indolence. It is perhaps more likely, given Felice's membership of the party and the friends with which they socialized, that the charge of inactivity was one made by others. Nonetheless, the feeling that theoretical politics should be subordinate to an engagement with actual politics was central to his thinking at this time.⁶⁷

The desire to act, and to be a participant rather than a theoretician, led ultimately to disillusionment. He wrote Harvey that, 'I find that my disgust with the rigmarole of the faithful plus my doubts about matters of policy immobilize me. I lack enthusiasm, to put it mildly.' Despite his rationalization of his decision to join, he could not dampen his desire for intellectual independence for long. He was ill suited to a life within the party, not due to an innate inertia, but, rather, due to an inherent prudence and appreciation of the plurality of truth. In spite of his own apprehension regarding the party, he did not disparage those who were able to find an agreeable home within the narrow confines of the party. The sophistication of mind of those like he and Harvey tended to lead to paralysis when it came to the actual workings of politics. Those who could act without thought were the ones who kept the party running and ensured its continued existence. They would make errors of judgment, or, in many cases, act without forming judgment at all. However, Hofstadter was happy to admit, 'as Lenin said—quoting Lenin naturally proves anything—only those who do nothing make no mistakes.' As he moved towards his exit from the party, he continued to see something worthy of respect in the ability to take action, regardless of the possibility of having acted in error.⁶⁸

By February 1939, Hofstadter would admit to having 'quietly eased myself out of the Columbia graduate unit' and his determination to 'stay out.' His sympathy for, or, at

⁶⁷ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 1938, HSP.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

least, willingness to accept the necessary dogmatism of the typical party member seems to have dissipated. Less than a year after joining the party, he could now see no justification for the unthinking implementation of the dictates of the central party or the rigidity of thought displayed by those within the party. He would write, 'There is nothing so crude as the Stalinist mentality.' Indeed, his detachment from the party seems to have heralded a rapid loss of faith in the central political tenets that had informed his thinking since his high school days. Just two months after his departure from the party, Hofstadter would describe himself as an "ex-Marxist". Hofstadter's disavowal of Marxism may have been a knee-jerk reaction to his negative experiences of direct involvement with the Communist Party. However, it is undoubted that his time within the party served to cast doubt on much of what he had accepted as certitudes in his position as an engaged observer of radical politics. In words that anticipated those of Simone Weil and Raymond Aron in the mid-50s, Hofstadter explained the attraction of the party in terms of religious faith. He proclaimed, 'I got no faith. I don't believe in faith, not in anything...Communism [is] a substitute religion...Marxism itself is pervaded with a quasi-religious teleology.' His participation in party activities had challenged his beliefs and left him unconvinced of the credibility of the revolutionary project.⁶⁹

Like so many of his peers, disillusionment with the Communist Party, which had for a time seemed to offer the solution to the ills of the capitalist world, left Hofstadter in a political and intellectual void. In describing his sense of detachment, Hofstadter echoed the feelings of many of the intellectuals of the period. The unravelling of the communist dream had driven a wedge between those who believed in the primacy of the mind, and those who lived by the deed. The optimism with which Malcolm Cowley, in 1934, had proclaimed the future union of thinker and worker had quickly faded to a distant memory. As many cut their ties with the communist movement, they faced a return to a role, which had long been a comfortable, yet dispiriting one. They would once again take up a position of alienation. For Hofstadter, the separation from a movement that had played such a pivotal role in his intellectual formation was incredibly difficult to come to terms with. Whilst certain about his estrangement from the party, he was less confident about what this meant going forward. He summed up the sense of personal

⁶⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, February 16, 1939; April 30, 1939, HSP.

anguish, when he wrote Swados that the issue had 'been torturing me for some time.' He added with dismay, that 'I don't know what the relation of people like us can possibly be toward the changes that are likely to take place in the world...We are the people with no place to go.'⁷⁰ Just finding his feet as a postgraduate student at Columbia, the retreat to intellectual alienation was not a viable solution for Hofstadter. Nor, indeed, was it one that he would have found satisfactory. However, his decision to embark on a career within the historical profession would lead eventually to a resolution to the dilemma of how he might act in the world, yet also retain his intellectual independence.

⁷⁰ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 9, 1939, HSP.

Truth Happens: *Social Darwinism in American Thought*

Hofstadter's enrolment as a postgraduate student was the first tentative step on a journey that would eventually lead him to the pinnacle of the historical profession. However, it is evident from his correspondence that he was far from certain about where his future career lay. As he commenced his studies, his mind was very much shaped by the radical intellectual milieu outside the university rather than the academic world within. It had not been the draw of Columbia University that had brought him to New York, but rather the opportunity to play a role in the vibrant, radical intellectual community of the city, and he retained a sense that this was the environment in which he belonged. Whilst a teaching job seemed the obvious route and one that offered relative stability, he did not rule out the possibility of a career within the world of literary journalism.

By the time of his arrival, the history department at Columbia was beginning to re-establish itself as one of the most impressive in the country and one that, once again, sought to re-engage with an audience outside the walls of academe. Nevertheless, the nature of the dialogue between academic and public was decidedly different from the reciprocity of ideas that had marked the relationship between independent-minded scholars such as Charles Beard and John Dewey and the literary radicals of Greenwich Village in the pre-war era. There remained a gulf between the political and literary circles of which Hofstadter and Felice were part, and the academic world into which he was entering, and it was clear to which Hofstadter felt the greatest propinquity. Whilst Felice had managed to confidently stride into a successful career in journalism, Hofstadter, due both to temperament and circumstance, had yet to find a role that would allow him to combine his intellectual and political passions with his work.

Although he had not topped his class at Buffalo, Hofstadter was nonetheless comfortable with his position as one of the brightest students.¹ His correspondence suggests that he was not so assured at Columbia. In a letter to Swados, he declared that his reason for writing is the same as that for entering arguments, 'NOT to inform or convince anybody but to show the other fellow that he is an imbecile and that I am a GREAT man.' He then added, 'the second part of this is very difficult to do at Columbia, otherwise I assure you I wouldn't be bothering you.'² The intellectual battles in which he had engaged within Buffalo's Iron Room and the Philosophical Club had not fully prepared him for those he would encounter at Columbia. As the wife of a future colleague at Maryland noted, 'Dick didn't get into fights. He didn't go in for shouting matches,' and he seems to have found the adversarial style of some of his peers difficult.³ In several letters he complained of a fellow student, whom he described as being typical of the Jewish graduates of City College, who made a virtue of the constant contradiction of those around him. Nonetheless, despite his discomfort at the verbal sparring that seemed to accompany the graduate seminars, he would excel, as he always had, when left to consider his ideas with pen in hand.

Alongside classes in historical method, European feudalism, Europe in the Middle Ages, European colonial expansion, and economic and cultural aspects of American civilization, Hofstadter decided to write his master's thesis on the Board of Assessors of New York.⁴ However, a combination of the realization that his thesis topic was too large, and his growing interest in Harry Carmen's work on the relationship between economic forces and cultural conditions in the agricultural South, prompted Hofstadter to switch his focus to the subject of sharecropping. This topic offered him an opportunity to combine his political concerns with the New Deal administration with his growing interest in the intersection of cultural, social and economic history. By his second term at Columbia, with a suitable thesis topic in hand, Hofstadter seems to have become more confident of his academic standing. In early 1938, he wrote Swados that

¹ Class grade reports 1934-36, Julius W. Pratt Papers, Buffalo History Museum Research Library, Box 3 Folder 2.

² Hofstadter to Swados, November 7, 1937, HSP.

³ Elizabeth Earley, *Richard Hofstadter Project*.

⁴ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 102; Hofstadter to Swados, October 17, 1937, HSP.

‘my chances for a fellowship are looking up,’ and he and Felice spoke of plans to travel to the South to see sharecropping at first hand. The letter also gives an insight into Hofstadter’s growing desire to combine his political ideas with political action, as he hoped to ‘go out and help them in the fields so as to learn what it is like to be a sharecropper as well as seeing the actual operation of a little piece of socialism right in front of our eyes.’⁵ He was determined that his academic research be informed by his personal political interests.

Hofstadter’s choice of topic, “The Southeastern Cotton Tenants Under the AAA, 1933-1935”, was very much a live political issue and incredibly contemporary choice for a historical study. The original Agricultural Adjustment Act had been declared unconstitutional in 1936, and was re-enacted with amendments whilst Hofstadter wrote his thesis. This first substantive piece of historical research was emblematic of Hofstadter’s vision of the role of the history in contemporary political discourse. He later acknowledged that all his books were rooted in the political and intellectual debates of their time. In a 1960 interview, he explained, ‘What started me off as an historian was a sense of engagement with contemporary problems.’⁶ Unlike Jack Hexter, who saw danger in letting ‘the passions, prejudices, assumptions and prepossessions, the events, crises and tensions of the present’ impose on his view of the past, Hofstadter viewed the interaction as essential.⁷ The historian’s role was not to keep history free from the contamination of the present, but to let history speak to, and inform, the current debate.

The thesis itself was a damning indictment of the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration’s work in the South. Hofstadter discovered that behind the façade of farmer assistance was a system that was open to abuse. Government assistance frequently failed to reach the tenants and sharecroppers, as landlords manipulated the scheme to designate themselves as the rightful recipients. Whilst the New Deal was not

⁵ Hofstadter to Swados, February 9, 1938, RHP.

⁶ David Hawke, “Interview: Richard Hofstadter,” 136.

⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 375.

responsible for inequality in the social system in the South, its policies contributed to making the life of the sharecropper worse than they had been. Hofstadter concluded that the AAA was itself culpable for facilitating the malpractice. He wrote: 'Of all the undertakings of the Roosevelt administration, the AAA cotton program was farthest from giving a fair distribution of government largesse to all classes.'⁸ The president resisted the calls for reform for fear of making enemies of powerful conservative senators and jeopardizing the entire farm program. As Hofstadter pointed out, 'It is no accident that this occurred in the least democratic region in the United States, and one upon which the Democratic Party is heavily dependent.'⁹ The story was one of destitution precipitated by political corruption at local level and the political expediency of the nation's leaders. The reforming spirit of the administration was not sufficiently robust to triumph over the deep-seated inequities of the social structure in the Southern states or the exigencies of party politics.

The fellowship that Hofstadter had hoped for did not come to fruition, so the thesis was completed without access to those who had experienced first-hand the results of the disastrous failure in policy. In a letter to Marvin Farber, he admitted, 'there is only a small amount of scattered and incomplete evidence to go by, and to construct this into a reasonably satisfying general picture is as much a problem in logic as anything else.'¹⁰ The result was a rather dry, technical text which was constructed primarily from statistical data and crafted in a deductive, logical style. The thesis appeared to rely heavily on the Amberson Committee study that had been published alongside Norman Thomas's *The Plight of the Sharecropper*, in 1934, and an article by the same author the following year.¹¹ Indeed, Baker points out that ten of Hofstadter's major points are included within the Amberson article published in the *Nation*.¹² It is unclear whether the similarities between the two studies was purely a result of the paucity of source

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, "The Southeastern Cotton Tenants under the AAA, 1933-1935" (MA thesis, Columbia University, 1938), 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter to Marvin Farber, February 25, 1938, Marvin Farber Papers, Box 9, Folder 3.

¹¹ Norman Thomas, *The Plight of the Share-Cropper* (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1934); William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Share-Croppers," *The Nation*, February 13, 1935, 185-188.

¹² Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 111.

material or whether the Amberson study was used by Hofstadter as a base for his own argument. What is clear is that Hofstadter found the writing of the thesis 'more than ordinarily difficult.'¹³ Whilst his own impression of his first draft being 'very shitty' was likely to have been typically self-effacing, he appears to have been less than confident about his progress.¹⁴ A cartoon drawn by Hofstadter at the time depicts a fiendish-looking professor looming over the desk at a tiny, cowering student with the words: 'It may be interesting but it's NOT a master's thesis.'¹⁵ Undoubtedly, the work lacked much of the ease of style and lucidity that would mark his later writing. Nonetheless, despite his struggles, the achievement of having completed his masters degree, and the offer to work with Carmen on an article on farm tenancy convinced Hofstadter that he could pursue his studies further.¹⁶

In the fall of 1938, Hofstadter registered for further courses and began to consider the subject of his doctoral dissertation. The choice of topic was not a straightforward one. At first, he commenced work on a biography of the radical Reconstruction senator Benjamin Wade. Not satisfied that this topic was for him, he considered Lincoln's secretary of war, Simon Cameron. He was soon to discover that another scholar was already in an advanced stage of research on Cameron. Despite having little interest in the subject, a recommendation from John Allen Krout and the possibility of a stipend tempted him to consider a biography of the financier Jeremiah Wadsworth. As he explained to Swados, the topic 'did not grip me with fascination, but a \$1000 subsidy...overcame my better instincts by appealing to my cupidity and I was off.'¹⁷ It seems that the expected financial incentive did not materialise and plans for the thesis were put on hold whilst he completed the requirements of his first year of doctoral study.

Hofstadter commenced work on a paper addressing the "Physiocratic Elements in the Thought of Jefferson and Franklin", which he jokingly declared was going to shed more

¹³ Hofstadter to Marvin Farber, February 25, 1938, Marvin Farber Papers, Box 9, Folder 3.

¹⁴ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 8, 1938, HSP.

¹⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d., HSP.

¹⁶ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 115.

¹⁷ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 1941, HSP.

light on the subject than anything previously written. Despite the witty tone, it is evident that he had started to feel a certain degree of cynicism regarding the historical profession. In describing the subject to Swados, he declared it to be 'really extraordinarily uninteresting and unimportant,' a fact that he believed would 'no doubt give me an excellent chance of publication when I finish it.'¹⁸ His appointment as alternate for a Columbia fellowship later in the academic year triggered a sense of disillusionment with the internal workings of the university. The announcement provoked an angry reaction and he complained to Swados that 'the guys who got the fellowships are little shits who never accomplished or published anything.'¹⁹ In a later interview he admitted that he had, at the time, considered the snub to have had an anti-Semitic element. However, there is no mention of this in the contemporaneous material and he stated that he subsequently believed his initial sentiment to be unfounded.²⁰

The disillusionment with academic life continued and reached its height as he prepared for his PhD orals. He wrote Swados that he didn't 'care as much as I did before...I feel that even if I do pass, I won't get either a fellowship or a job, and that even if I do, I...will have to work so hard...that I won't be able to get anywhere on my own research.' Furthermore 'the pay will be lousy and besides there's at least a 50-50 chance that I'll be taken up in the draft.'²¹ By temperament Hofstadter was prone to self-doubt and had expressed concerns regarding his academic ability to Marvin Farber prior to the commencement of his studies.²² This was no doubt exacerbated by his failed fellowship application and the apprehension regarding his orals. A cartoon depicting a towering, ghoulish creature, which had escaped from a tiny urn entitled PhD orals and loomed over the small figure of Hofstadter as he turned away his face, gives some insight into his feelings at the time.²³ Hofstadter's uncertainty regarding his academic prospects, combined with the political incertitude caused by his split with the Communist Party, the news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of war in Europe, ensured that the

¹⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, November 10, 1938, HSP.

¹⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, April 15, 1939, HSP.

²⁰ Richard Hofstadter to Richard Kostelanetz, May 24, 1967, January 3, 1967, RHP, Box 5.

²¹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, November 25, 1939, HSP, Box 31.

²² Marvin Farber to Richard Hofstadter, August 15, 1936, Marvin Farber Papers, Box 9, Folder 3.

²³ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, n.d., HSP.

year ended on a pessimistic note. Interestingly, Felice's correspondence at the time suggests hers was a happier mood. Whilst she felt the world to be 'a terrible place' and sensed that they 'were walking on thin ice,' she nonetheless admitted that 'there is no other time in history I would have preferred to have lived in.' The world seemed 'so violent and fascinating' and she determined that she would seek out new experiences and live her life with a 'crazy eagerness.'²⁴ An increased salary and a job that offered both security and purpose allowed her a degree of freedom to enjoy the excitement and uncertainty of the times. Hofstadter was afforded no such comfort.

Hofstadter continued to wrestle with the problem of how he might combine the dual roles of active political engagement, which offered little by way of intellectual sophistication, and academic study, which satisfied his longing for intellectual expression but provided no obvious root to social activism. His enrolment in Merle Curti's course, "The History of American Social Thought", and the relationship he developed with Curti had a profound impact on both his writing and his sense of the interconnection between his academic studies and his wider philosophical ideas. Curti's course set out to investigate the 'forces moulding ideas, conditions moulding ideas, and the relation of social ideas and attitudes to cultural values and achievements.'²⁵ A Midwesterner, and student of Frederick Jackson Turner, Curti shared little with Hofstadter in terms of background. However, importantly for Hofstadter, they shared a distaste for the capitalist system and its apologists, and an interest in the social history of ideas. Curti had successfully combined his role as a respected observer of the past with a burning passion for social reform and a radical political outlook. His work and career offered Hofstadter a model for transcendence of the seemingly intractable problem of marrying the two key concerns of political relevance and intellectual reflection. In the words of Paul Conkin, Curti 'stressed the proper marriage of intellect and action.'²⁶ Hofstadter drew inspiration as much from his example as a historian engagé as the quality of his ideas. A letter written to Curti by Hofstadter's typist many years later illuminates the pivotal role that Curti played at this formative stage in his

²⁴ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, October 25, 1939, HSP.

²⁵ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 116.

²⁶ Paul Conkin, 'Merle Curti,' in Robert Allen Rutland, ed., *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945-2000* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 31.

career. Myra Hicks wrote of a conversation with Hofstadter in which he had remarked that Curti 'had more direct influence upon him and the direction of his career than any one person he knew.' Indeed, he would never cease to be grateful to the man who had 'changed his entire attitude to his work.'²⁷

The two had begun to take lunch together soon after Hofstadter had enrolled on the course and quickly formed what Felice described as a 'mutual admiration society by the middle of the year.'²⁸ Hofstadter himself was rather coy regarding Curti's influence and he bemoaned the fact that Felice overplayed their association. In a letter to Swados he described Curti as 'just a guy who teaches at Columbia...and who is doing some pioneer work in that line. He is very much impressed with my stuff and is a Marxist.'²⁹ His reticence to inflate the importance of their relationship is interesting. Perhaps the dashing of his earlier hopes of a fellowship had engendered a sense of caution regarding his position within the department. More likely, his strong sense of the independence of his own mind made him baulk at the suggestion that his ideas were influenced by anyone else. Despite the somewhat cool evaluation of Curti's influence, it is evident that his political views were, at the time, of great significance to Hofstadter. Curti was a leftist scholar working at the pinnacle of the profession. Ironically, Curti did not consider himself to be a Marxist historian and was unaware of Hofstadter's entry into the Communist Party or Hofstadter's interpretation of his work as having a Marxist framework until the publication of Baker's research.³⁰ As Hofstadter would find out later, the interpretation of one's work is often more influential than the intention, and it is clear that Hofstadter's perception of Curti as a Marxist gave him confidence in his own ability to combine intellectual and political concerns in his work.

Whilst Curti was teaching Hofstadter he was working on his influential study, *The Growth Of American Thought*, and it is unquestionable that the ideas contained within

²⁷ Myra Hicks to Merle Curti, September 19, 1961, Merle Eugene Curti Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁸ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, February 6, 1939, HSP.

²⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, February 16, 1939, HSP.

³⁰ David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 203.

the work would have been discussed within the classroom and during their social meetings.³¹ The key to the work was the correlation between the growth of thought and the social milieu within which those ideas emerged. This had been a central interest of Curti's for many years, his attempts to analyse the interrelationship dating back to his *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, published in 1935. In this book, Curti had set out to study, through the prism of education, the 'relationships between given social ideas... and changing interests in American life.'³² Clearly written from a left-wing viewpoint, the study criticized educational leaders for their entrenchment within a world of privilege and wealth. Underlying the analysis was a critique of the predominance of individualism and the primacy of the individual over society. Hofstadter was drawn to the combination of the overt class partisanship that he attributed to Curti's Marxism and his innovative approach to the study of ideas. Whilst Hofstadter's early attempts to capture the subtlety and reciprocity of the relationship between society and ideas fell short of those of his mentor, his writing began to take on a newfound complexity and refinement. The bifurcation between the logical and deductive style of his academic writing and his personal philosophical and political concerns was beginning to disappear.

Hofstadter's rather cynical suggestion that the triviality of the subject of his essay for Curti meant it had a chance of publication proved correct as it appeared as "Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition" in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in October 1941.³³ The paper, much like his master's thesis, gave him an opportunity to engage and take issue with the ideas of one of the nation's most eminent historians. Hofstadter dismissed Parrington's assertion that Jefferson's economic theory was Physiocratic in origin, instead seeing the only common link as being an espousal of the tenets of laissez-faire. Hofstadter began, as Curti would have demanded, by placing Parrington in his

³¹ Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943).

³² Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1935), xv.

³³ Hofstadter, "Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (October 1941); Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 119-136. Baker describes three essays for Curti's course which, in addition to the essay on Parrington, included an essay entitled "Jefferson's Ideas on Class Relations" and "Wendell Phillips 1860-1884". Baker quoted extensively from these essays. Unfortunately, they no longer appear within the Hofstadter Papers and I, therefore, have been unable to make use of this material.

social and intellectual milieu. He noted that 'it was appropriate that our long American heritage of grass roots radicalism should have been summed up by a thinker whose own roots were firm in populist soil.'³⁴ His Western background had resulted in an innate suspicion of the urban metropolis and sensitivity to the agrarian roots of American democracy. Therefore, it was only natural that Parrington should see the period as one dominated by the conflict between capitalism and agrarianism, a battle of competing economies and ideologies.

Whilst Parrington suggested that the Physiocratic theory 'must have seemed to Jefferson...little other than a deduction from the open facts of American life', Hofstadter argued that it was, in fact, incompatible with the American system.³⁵ Furthermore, Jefferson had been swift to realize this and had been clear in his rejection of the central tenets of the Physiocratic system. The belief in the primacy of the agricultural economy ensured a degree of commonality, and both Jefferson and Franklin had ties with the Physiocrats. However, as Hofstadter noted, the fact that neither had advocated Physiocracy in their public writing or attempted to publish the Physiocrat's work was significant. The key concept of a single tax on land revenue, one that was eminently suitable for the feudal society in France, was not one that would be countenanced by America's agrarian leaders. Rather than an economic system built on the taxation of agriculture, Jefferson fought to free American agriculture from the unfair burden of unjust taxation. It was this that created the 'gulf between him and his French friends which could not be bridged.'³⁶

The struggle between Jefferson and Hamilton was to Parrington's mind, 'a conflict between the rival principles of Quesnay and Adam Smith', the theory of agrarianism versus that of capitalism.³⁷ However, Hofstadter saw no such clear distinction as, he contended, both theories had *laissez-faire* at their core. There were essential differences, but where 'Smith differed from the Physiocrats, Jefferson followed Smith.'³⁸

³⁴ Hofstadter, "Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition," 391.

³⁵ Ibid., 392, 393.

³⁶ Ibid., 396.

³⁷ Ibid., 399.

³⁸ Ibid., 397.

Indeed, it was Hamilton who was unable to accept the premises of *laissez-faire*. This was not a dispute between agrarianism and capitalism but rather one over competing visions of capitalism. The agrarians 'accepted the capitalist order, without desire or ability to propose an alternative society.'³⁹ They sought reform rather than the destruction of the capitalist system and Jefferson, Hofstadter maintained, was a great deal closer to Hamilton than Parrington was willing to admit. He suggested that 'The ideological side of the Jefferson-Hamilton struggle may therefore be approached as a part of the world-wide struggle between laissez-faire and economic nationalism.'⁴⁰ His conclusion that, given the economic base in the United States, capitalist theory reigned supreme was clearly informed by his Marxism. However, more interestingly, the article marks the first suggestion of 'consensus' theory of the American past. In this original context, the critical aspect of 'consensus' is evident. That all of the nation's great thinkers were capitalists, whose only disagreement was over detail, and that America had produced no ideology to compete with that of capitalism, was not a cause for celebration.

Under Curti's tutelage, Hofstadter had begun to mature as a historian and his distinctive historical voice and style had started to appear in his writing. However, the problem of finding an acceptable thesis topic continued to trouble Hofstadter in the months following his oral examination and threatened to undo the progress that he had made. In March 1940, he confided in Swados that 'I am very depressed these days...I have suggested several significant titles...and they have been rejected. They will not let me do anything important.'⁴¹ Hofstadter's desire to write history that had significance beyond that of simply adding to the historical record was of crucial importance and his belief in the wider function of historical writing was abundantly clear as he strived to find a subject for his thesis. He could see both a contemporary, political and historical relevance in the work of his mentor, and he wished his work to have a comparable impact. Hofstadter yearned for a subject through which he could reflect his own political views and, in writing, both articulate and establish his intellectual position. His

³⁹ Ibid., 400.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 399.

⁴¹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March, 1940, HSP.

praise for Max Eastman as a man who 'lives by his writing' reflected the importance that he attached to the relationship between the author and his work.⁴² Whilst Eastman could engage in work that was wholly reflective of his self, Hofstadter was limited by the strictures of the department. The growing feeling that he was being thwarted in his attempts to write history that mattered caused considerable despondency. He admitted to Swados that he had finally reached the point of capitulation, and, regrettably, the importance of his research topic had become secondary to finding something that he could complete quickly. As he later described, he had been reduced to an aspiration to simply 'get my parchment and scam the hell out of here.'⁴³ He had clearly been dispirited by the experience and his correspondence gives a real sense that he had appreciable doubts about his future prospects in the historical profession.

The anxiety and discouragement caused by the travail of finding a topic were mirrored by a sense of disaffection with politics. In a letter to Swados, he professed to feeling that he was no longer a Marxist, an evaluation that had left him 'all adither.' The awareness of past mistakes offered little by way of comfort. Instead, Hofstadter concluded that it 'leaves you uncertain as to what to do in the future.'⁴⁴ Just two years earlier, he had entered Columbia in a spirit of optimism, delighted at having abandoned law for history and imbued with a sense of the possibilities of political radicalism. By early 1940, his optimism regarding both his studies and his political beliefs had significantly waned. His correspondence with Swados during that year was pervaded by the despondency felt at the acceptance that he had become 'permanently alienated from the spirit of the revolutionary movements.'⁴⁵ His disillusionment was not with the workers, but with those like himself, the 'petty bourgeois intellectuals' who had been deluded in thinking they could live a revolutionary life.⁴⁶ He conceded he had been temperamentally ill suited to the reality of a political life determined not by argument or discourse but by dogmatism, organization, and party discipline. In the end, Hofstadter had felt both unwilling and unable to make the transition from radical intellectual to true

⁴² Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, December 16, HSP.

⁴³ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 1941, HSP.

⁴⁴ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 1940, HSP.

⁴⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 8, 1940, HSP.

⁴⁶ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, December 16, 1940, HSP.

revolutionary. Whilst he predicted that the future might see the triumph of the workers, he professed to a scepticism regarding his own 'ability...to take a constructive place in any new society.'⁴⁷ As he wrestled with his loss of political faith and his protracted search for a thesis topic, it was a time of great uncertainty.

The offer of a teaching post at Brooklyn College provided a welcome source of stability and purpose at an unsettled time. The position, an emergency vacancy, offered six hours of teaching in the evenings at \$2.50 per hour.⁴⁸ Hofstadter was pleased with the appointment despite the low pay and felt it 'valuable for teaching experience and as entre to city system.'⁴⁹ His first taste of teaching was an enjoyable one, and he reported that it was 'a lark to teach underclassmen...All you have to do is kid around and they love it.'⁵⁰ However, he was also touched by the hardships experienced by his students, most of who attended class having completed a full day's work. It was a poignant reminder of the working-class struggle for betterment and the gulf between the corridors of Columbia and the streets of Brooklyn. The following year, Hofstadter took up his first full-time post at the downtown branch of City College. The circumstances of his appointment are of particular significance given his earlier membership of the Communist Party. More than fifty City College faculty and staff members had been subpoenaed to appear before the Rapp-Coudert Committee which had been tasked by the state legislature to investigate subversive activities in New York's public schools and colleges. In the aftermath of the hearings, several faculty members were dismissed due to alleged ties with the Communist Party. It was these dismissals that opened up the position that Hofstadter secured. As Eric Foner, a student of Hofstadter's and son of one of the victims of the purge, noted, 'Ironically, Hofstadter's first job resulted from the flourishing of the kind of political paranoia that he would later lament in his historical writings.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, February 8, 1940, HSP.

⁴⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, February 8, 1940, HSP.

⁵⁰ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, November 1940, HSP.

⁵¹ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 8.

The search for a thesis topic came to an end shortly after he had reported that he had reached the point of desperation. The study, an investigation into the influence of social Darwinism in American thought, fitted perfectly with Hofstadter's wish to make his historical writing relevant to present intellectual concerns. The work was very much a product of, and comment on, the contemporary political debate. He would later explain, 'I was haunted by the disparity between our official individualism and the bitter facts of life as anyone could see them during the great depression.'⁵² To Hofstadter, the conservative justification for challenging Roosevelt's relief plans seemed in many ways to duplicate the arguments that had been used to oppose social reform in the second half of the nineteenth century. The topical nature of his choice of subject anticipated a lifelong consideration of the interrelationship between historical past and immediate reality. The decision to address the subject of social Darwinism was reflective of the personal concerns and ideas of a young radical coming to terms with his experience of the depression and its political and social consequences. As Hofstadter described it, 'while my story ended with 1915, the year before my birth, the emotional resonances were those of my own dawning adulthood.'⁵³

The commencement of work on what he deemed to be a significant study brought a renewed sense of purpose and confidence. Felice reported that 'Dick is now happy and busy on a book...the kind of book in which all his friends want to have a hand.'⁵⁴ Hofstadter himself added a scribbled note to confirm that the subject was all his. As Brown noted, 'Hofstadter knew that he had stumbled onto something special.'⁵⁵ The fact that Felice had, the previous year, been engaged in a study of the relationship between social Darwinism and capitalism in the late nineteenth century meant that he hadn't had to stumble too far.⁵⁶ Whilst their time within the Communist Party had seen some divergence of political view, it is clear that there was a great deal of commonality in their thought. In October 1939, Felice had written of a 'great revolution in my own thought...I am now more interested in the irrational than in systems of thought or

⁵² Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American History," KLRU-TEMP Video Collection.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, June 2, 1940, HSP.

⁵⁵ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 29.

⁵⁶ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, November 25, 1939, HSP.

means of logical activity.’ The stated catalyst for this shift in focus was her reading of Carl Sandberg’s ‘spiritual biography’ of Lincoln and Max Lerner’s ‘Revolution in Ideas’, published earlier that month in *The Nation*. Whilst Marvin Farber had taught both she and Hofstadter that ‘man is a thinking machine,’ Felice had arrived at the conclusion that this was ‘a dirty lie,’ which had taken her four years to unlearn.⁵⁷ Likewise, Hofstadter was discovering through his own writing that a concentration on the rational failed to explain either the peculiarities of biography or the anomalies of history.

It is reasonable to assume that Hofstadter would have both read and discussed Lerner’s essay in *The Nation*. His interest in Lerner grew greater when, in February 1940, he took delivery of Lerner’s new book, *Ideas are Weapons*, and was tasked with completing a review for the *Political Science Quarterly*. He was undoubtedly impressed with the work and concluded that ‘the volume contains one of the most cogent expressions of the functional history of ideas.’⁵⁸ As Lerner outlined in the foreword, the collection of essays and reviews was an articulation of his developing concern with the instrumentality of ideas. Long interested in the study of ideas, he had come to the realisation that his interest came not from their logic or validity, but ‘their history, the way in which they emerged out of the biographies of their creators...and tensions of their time...the way in which they have finally taken the shape of the uses to which they have been put.’⁵⁹ Whilst Hofstadter was already beginning to widen his conception of the history of ideas, these words must have provided both encouragement and inspiration for his thesis. It was Lerner’s assertion that intellectual history had arrived at a critical juncture, faced with recognising the fact ‘that the rational right-thinking man has...ceased to be...the center of our intellectual system.’⁶⁰ Neither the genteel history of educated men nor the broad, and rather nebulous, conception of the ‘climate of opinion’ were satisfactory explanations of the modern world. Instead historians must see ‘that the idea has meaning only in a dynamic context of a struggle over power and values.’⁶¹

⁵⁷ Felice Swados to Harvey Swados, October 25, 1939, HSP.

⁵⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, March 1940, HSP.

⁵⁹ Max Lerner, *Ideas Are Weapons the History and Uses of Ideas*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), ix,x.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The assertion that the reception, transformation and use of an idea was of equal, if not greater, importance than the creation and intent, chimed with Hofstadter's nascent sense of the relationship between ideas, society and the individual. Lerner had given expression to an approach to intellectual history that would inspire Hofstadter, and provided a blueprint for his study of social Darwinism.

Hofstadter, who was now buoyed by the excitement of working on what he felt was a significant study, became immersed in research throughout the summer of 1940. By the time the new academic year arrived he was in a position to commence writing. An article on William Graham Sumner, which would be published the following year in *The New England Quarterly*, was quickly followed by the completion of his first chapter.⁶² Still somewhat diffident regarding his own academic ability, Hofstadter took a great deal of confidence from the positive comments received from friends who had read both pieces of work and he described feeling that he 'was at the pinnacle.' However, as he struggled with the second chapter, the self-doubt returned and he wrote Swados, 'my powers are failing...I sincerely believe I am lost...I no longer care about social Darwinism...and I don't care who knows it.'⁶³ Typically, the doubts proved to be unfounded and, despite this minor crisis, progress continued relatively unhindered. Just a year after expressing concerns about not being able to move forward with his writing, he had graduated. The completed dissertation received considerable praise from the examiners who, according to Hofstadter, described it as 'the best exam...in 25 yrs.'⁶⁴ Whilst this may have been a playful boast, there is no doubt that the work was an impressive one, and one that ensured his reputation within the faculty.

The thesis was published in 1944 under the title *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*, and announced his arrival as one of the most promising young scholars of his generation. As Foner writes in his introduction to the 1992 edition, '*Social*

⁶² Richard Hofstadter, "William Graham Sumner, Social Darwinist," *The New England Quarterly*, 14 (1941), 457-77.

⁶³ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 1941, HSP.

⁶⁴ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 21, 1942, HSP.

Darwinism has had an impact matched by few books of its generation.⁶⁵ The impact was immediate, and the initial reviews were, on the whole, extremely positive. Howard Mumford Jones, in his *New York Times* review, described the work 'as excellent a study as you can hope to find.'⁶⁶ Ray Allen Billington proclaimed Hofstadter a 'pioneer', and concluded his review by declaring 'this is an important book.'⁶⁷

As his first published monograph, *Social Darwinism* is rarely seen as instructive in discussions of Hofstadter's role as a public intellectual. Nonetheless, as Foner suggests, 'the book demonstrates Hofstadter's ability, even in a dissertation, to move beyond the academic readership to address a broad general public.'⁶⁸ Whilst the initial success of the book may have owed something to his choice of a felicitous subject for the period, his ability to speak to an audience outside the field of history was already evident. Billington wrote approvingly of Hofstadter's written style as he described how his 'skilful pen reduces their complex theories to crystal clarity' providing the 'fascination of a well-knit detective story.'⁶⁹ Thomas C. Cochran noted that 'Hofstadter writes with a clarity and sparkle that should make his book pleasant reading even for economic historians unaccustomed to delving into philosophical literature.'⁷⁰ Whilst he was undoubtedly influenced historically by Beard and Parrington, and more immediately by his mentor, Curti, his style had its genesis in his readings in literary criticism. As Hofstadter himself commented, 'people like Edmund Wilson had much more influence on my style than any historian.'⁷¹ His later reputation as a gifted stylist, one who managed to make his work accessible without any loss of profundity, was in early evidence in this his first work.

⁶⁵ Eric Foner, "The Education of Richard Hofstadter," in *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 35.

⁶⁶ Howard Mumford Jones, "The Inequality of Man: Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *New York Times*, 21 January 1945, 111.

⁶⁷ Ray Allen Billington, "Review: *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 31 (December 1, 1944), 458-459.

⁶⁸ Foner, "The Education of Richard Hofstadter," 36.

⁶⁹ Billington, "Review: *Social Darwinism*," 459.

⁷⁰ Thomas C. Cochran, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *The Journal of Economic History*, 5 (1945), 251.

⁷¹ Hawke, "Interview: Richard Hofstadter," 139

The book was also typical of Hofstadter's ability to produce a piece of analysis that would have a lasting impact on public discourse. The study introduced the term 'social Darwinism' into the lexicon of both intellectual historians and the wider reading public. Hofstadter's assertion in the early chapters of the book, that Darwinian principles were used to justify the laissez-faire economic theories and offer support to the 'tooth and claw' capitalism of the late nineteenth century, has led to the lasting impression of social Darwinism as a theory worthy only of opprobrium. Barack Obama's attack on Paul Ryan's budget plans, in the lead up to the 2012 Presidential election, created headlines for his description of the Republican proposal as 'thinly veiled social Darwinism.'⁷² *The Washington Post* was one of a multitude of newspapers that asked the question, 'What does that mean?'⁷³ The universal conclusion was that 'social Darwinism, as almost everyone knows, is a "Bad Thing".'⁷⁴ Social Darwinism has come to mean the transposition of key concepts in evolutionary thought, primarily the struggle for existence and natural selection, to the fields of politics and the social sciences. However, as Daniel Becquemont has pointed out, 'what we still call "Social Darwinism" is the result of a misunderstanding.'⁷⁵ Geoffrey Hodgson's analysis of the frequency and context of usage of the term suggests that the publication of *Social Darwinism* has done much to perpetrate this misunderstanding. Prior to 1944 the term had very little currency and, on the whole, was applied to the use of Darwinian concepts in the justification of militarism and war.⁷⁶ The term went from relative obscurity to commonplace in the wake of publication.

The more common discussions of *Social Darwinism* in surveys of Hofstadter's work tend to interpret it in two distinct but overlapping ways, as a study firmly rooted in the

⁷² "Obama Accuses Republicans of 'Social Darwinism' over Paul Ryan Budget," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/03/obama-accuses-republicans-social-darwinism-budget>.

⁷³ Rachel Weiner, "What Obama Meant by 'social Darwinism,'" *The Washington Post - Blogs*, April 5, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/what-obama-meant-by-social-darwinism/2012/04/04/gIQAKIZLvS_blog.html.

⁷⁴ Robert Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 3.

⁷⁵ Daniel Becquemont, "Social Darwinism: From Reality to Myth and from Myth to Reality," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 42 (March 2011), 12.

⁷⁶ Geoffrey M. Hodgson, "Social Darwinism in Anglophone Academic Journals: A Contribution to the History of the Term," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 17 (2004), 428–63.

Progressive school of history or as a product of Hofstadter's youthful radicalism. Brown saw the work as part of the wider move, influenced by the events of the 1930s, to sculpt a reinvigorated liberal tradition. Consequently, *Social Darwinism* 'more than any other Hofstadter book...adopted a neo-Progressive perspective.'⁷⁷ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick's portrait of the gradual maturation of Hofstadter's mind depicts it as a work of early promise that hinted at the innovative nature of his future work. Nevertheless, their criticism of the work is that 'for all its dexterity, [it] was still an exercise in the Progressive mode.'⁷⁸ Whereas some saw a Progressive framework, Jack Pole felt Hofstadter's epistemology was easily discernible, and that it was clearly Marxist.⁷⁹ Both interpretations have value, and indeed are complementary; the Progressive historical model and Marxist thought had a great deal in common. When Hofstadter attempted to explain the rise and fall of social Darwinism, 'he falls back on the base superstructure model shared by Marxists and Beardians in the 1930s.'⁸⁰ Understandably Hofstadter was influenced by the dominant moods in both the historical profession and amongst his contemporaries. In many ways *Social Darwinism* reflected Hofstadter's engagement with and emerging ambivalence towards both his intellectual forebears and his political beliefs. His distinctive voice, one that was forged in the radical milieu of 1930s New York but burnished in the History Department of Columbia University, was beginning to emerge.

Hofstadter's contention was that Herbert Spencer, the English social philosopher, created the theory behind social Darwinism. The man whom Hofstadter described as 'the stinkweed of modern philosophy' had been the first to coin the phrase 'survival of the fittest', a description Darwin would later take as a description of natural selection.⁸¹ Spencer used the term to describe the evolution of human society in its inevitable progression towards equilibrium. His immutable faith in universal laws meant that he was antagonistic to any attempts to limit the individualism that he saw as driving

⁷⁷ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 29.

⁷⁸ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter: A Progress," in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 304.

⁷⁹ Jack Pole, "Richard Hofstadter," in *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States 1945-2000*, by Robert Allen Rutland (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 71.

⁸⁰ Foner, "The Education of Richard Hofstadter," 33.

⁸¹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, May 1941, HSP.

society's evolution. Society like nature was self-regulating and as such required no intervention from government. Hofstadter's study concentrated on the obvious attraction of such a theory to industrialists keen to dismiss the growing calls for the regulation of business in the period after the Civil War. Spencer's thought, which was girded by the growing prestige of Darwinian principles, would prove a useful corollary to the traditional American virtue of individualism. As Hofstadter stated, the social Darwinist theory of progress was 'admirably suited to the American scene.'⁸²

The real villain of the piece was William Graham Sumner, the man Hofstadter saw as the intellectual mastermind behind America's acceptance of the social Darwinist faith. Sumner, 'like some latter-day Calvin... came to preach the predestination of the social order and the salvation of the economically elect through the survival of the fittest.'⁸³ Sumner combined the evolutionary thought of Darwin with a strong sense of the Protestant work ethic and substantial measure of classical economics. His conclusions were very much in the mould of Spencer. Like Spencer, Sumner was a vocal opponent of government intervention in economic affairs, his belief being that such actions could lead to social and economic catastrophe in America. In his view, democracy was merely a stage in human development, one that was workable at the current time, due to the excess of land available. When the ratio of land to people became less favourable, competition would determine American society's course. For Sumner, 'Competition was glorious. Just as survival was the result of strength, success was the reward of virtue.'⁸⁴ Such proclamations would ensure his place as a spokesman for the economic status quo.

It is in the chapters concerning Spencer and Sumner that Hofstadter set out his thesis that Darwinian concepts, in the hands of the wrong men, were used to fortify the defence of laissez-faire industrialism and stifle calls for reform. As David Hollinger notes, *Social Darwinism* 'left the impression that Darwin's work had been used by many

⁸² Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 18.

⁸³ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 42.

influential social theorists and business leaders to justify political conservatism.⁸⁵ Robert Bannister, the foremost critic of this interpretation of the application of Darwinian principles to social thought, criticizes Hofstadter for his acceptance and promotion of the myth that Darwinism was routinely used to defend laissez-faire.⁸⁶ He sees Hofstadter as guilty of failing to distinguish between Darwinian theory and Spencer's thought. Spencer himself never used the term 'social Darwinism' and indeed was keen to assert his own independence from Darwin. In a note to his 1873 work *The Study of Sociology*, he somewhat indignantly pointed out that, as 'most readers will conclude that in this and in the preceding section, I am simply carrying out the views of Mr. Darwin...I shall be excused for pointing out that the same beliefs, otherwise expressed, are contained in *Social Statics*, published in December, 1850.'⁸⁷ Spencer's theory of the 'survival of the fittest' had been developed independently of Darwinian evolutionary biology, rather than being derived from it. Interestingly, according to Hodgson's bibliometric analysis, the term 'social Darwinist' was applied to Spencer only twice prior to publication of *Social Darwinism*. Likewise, the first association of Sumner with the term is in Hofstadter's 1941 essay "William Graham Sumner: Social Darwinist."⁸⁸ Hofstadter himself later commented that the term 'social Darwinism' had been used less than 'half a dozen times' prior to his study.⁸⁹

Whilst Hofstadter was at work on his thesis, Bert Loewenberg published a paper entitled 'Darwinism Comes to America, 1859-1900'. The paper, published in 1941, had been presented a year previously at a general session of the American Historical Association devoted to 'The Reception of the Doctrine of Evolution in the United States.' Despite the meeting being held in New York, there is no evidence to suggest that Hofstadter attended the session. Loewenberg's stated intention was 'to trace the influence of evolutionism on American thought.'⁹⁰ One would expect that, given the

⁸⁵ David A Hollinger, "Review of Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*," *Isis*, 71 (1980), 353.

⁸⁶ Bannister, *Social Darwinism*.

⁸⁷ Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873), 418.

⁸⁸ Hodgson, "Social Darwinism in Anglophone Academic Journals," 447-448.

⁸⁹ Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American History."

⁹⁰ Bert James Loewenberg, "Darwinism Comes to America, 1859-1900," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 28 (December 1, 1941), 339.

subject, similar ground would be covered. However, Loewenberg was clear that 'other varieties of evolutionism, particularly Herbert Spencer's, are incidental to the main discussion.'⁹¹ Loewenberg's study would be much more specific in its treatment of Darwinian evolution's impact on America. In his review of *Social Darwinism*, Loewenberg criticised Hofstadter's work for having 'too little conceptual discrimination' and failing to discuss the role of ideas.⁹² Loewenberg felt that in order that to reach an understanding of the convergence of Darwinism and Spencer's ideas there must be an understanding of their distinctions. Hofstadter's analysis took its influences from different sources to Loewenberg. The focus on economic self-interest as the driving force in American history, common to both the Progressive and Marxist models of history, played a central role in Hofstadter's judgements and conclusions. In true Progressive style the heroes and villains appeared self-evident. However, influenced by Curti, and his undergraduate teacher, Julius Pratt, he would not be completely restricted by the Manichean model. Hofstadter aimed to delve deeper into the ideas and values that influenced the main protagonists.

Contemporary reviewers were quick to see the significance of Hofstadter's assertion that social Darwinism gave succour and ammunition to the forces of reaction. Alice Felt Tyler wrote, 'the analysis of the philosophy of Herbert Spencer and its influence upon American thought is one of the most valuable contributions of his book.'⁹³ M. F. Ashley Montagu was in no doubt that the book demonstrates that 'social Darwinism is a phenomenon of the greatest interest with the widest possible implications for an understanding of the Era of Materialism.'⁹⁴ Hofstadter seemed to have shown beyond doubt that the doctrines of social Darwinism were embraced with open arms by the business establishment in America. As Billington wrote, Hofstadter had clearly explicated how the social Darwinist doctrine 'made its authors the darlings of the robber

⁹¹ Ibid., 340.

⁹² Bert James Loewenberg, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *American Historical Review*, 50 (July 1945), 821.

⁹³ Alice Felt Tyler, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860 - 1915*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 6 (September 1945), 138.

⁹⁴ M. F. Ashley Montagu, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860 - 1915*," *Isis*, 36 (January 1946), 146.

barons.⁹⁵ The emphasis of most reviews was firmly on Hofstadter's skill in analysing the association between social Darwinism and the conservative forces in American society in the period. However, some of the contemporary reviewers seemed more alert to the ambiguity in the work and more willing to question the premises of the study. Brogan pre-empted Bannister's primary criticism when he wrote, 'it is less Darwinism than Spencerism that is the theme.'⁹⁶ Harold Larrabee was also of the impression that Hofstadter's social Darwinism 'is perhaps seven-tenths Herbert Spencerism.'⁹⁷ Despite contemporary reviewers being cautious about the direct link drawn between Spencer and Darwin, the distinction became lost in the years after publication.

The book's legacy has, to a great degree, been built on the two chapters concerning Spencer and Sumner, yet the majority of the book was devoted to a discussion of other thinkers. The distinction between Hofstadter's treatment of 'Darwinian individualism' and 'Darwinian collectivism' is one that is rarely considered in discussions of the work. Undoubtedly, this owes much to the ambiguous nature of the term 'social Darwinism', as used by Hofstadter. In his preface, he had indicated a broad concern with 'the adaptation of Darwinism and related biological concepts to social ideologies.' However, the association of social Darwinism with the 'survival of the fittest' theory of domestic and foreign policy was the dominant theme of the conclusion.⁹⁸ In his assessment of social Darwinism as a force for ill, Hofstadter reflected the mood of the times. The experiences of the Depression years had prompted many to question their faith in the capitalist system, and this reappraisal inevitably coloured the scholarship of the period.

As Bannister has pointed out, the origins of social Darwinist hypothesis cannot be limited to Hofstadter's study alone, but should be seen as a product of a particular environment within Columbia University. He writes, 'the idea received definitive statement in a series of works during the early 1940s: Carlton J. Hayes *A Generation of Materialism* (1941); Jacques Barzun's *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner* (1941); Thomas

⁹⁵ Billington, "Review of *Social Darwinism*," 459.

⁹⁶ Denis Brogan, "Review: *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," 123.

⁹⁷ Harold A. Larrabee, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *Ethics*, 56 (1946), 151.

⁹⁸ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, vii.

Cochran and William Miller's *Age of Enterprise* (1943); and Merle Curti's *The Growth of American Thought* (1943).'⁹⁹ This group of Columbia historians shared ideas and reinforced the mutually accepted idea that Darwinian theories had played a significant role in conservative thought in the post-Civil War period. The idea would soon move beyond the confines of Columbia and influence scholarship on the period for years to come.

Hofstadter devoted an entire chapter to only one other figure, that of Lester Ward. The main thrust of Ward's work was the idea that society was not a prisoner to a predetermined set of rules, based on natural law. An evolutionist himself, Ward pointed to the power of the human mind and its ability to change the environment around it. Human beings, as active participants in evolution, were able to mould and reform their institutions to create a better society. Rather than adopting a laissez-faire approach, society could, and should, take control of its own destiny. Hofstadter praised Ward for his production of a 'positive body of social theory adaptable to the uses of reform.'¹⁰⁰ It was clear that Hofstadter preferred the meliorism of Ward to Sumner's uncompromising belief in individualism. However, when he was forced to consider Ward's later thought regarding the necessity of conflict, the lines became blurred. In a less than subtle sleight of hand, Hofstadter made the claim that these ideas 'found but a small and transient place in Ward's work.'¹⁰¹ The stark dichotomy between the two thinkers was further complicated by the fact that Ward was not an outspoken critic of a key criterion of Hofstadter's social Darwinism, 'biologically derived social speculation'. Ward had criticized social Darwinism for its lack of Darwinian principles: 'It is wholly inappropriate to characterize as social Darwinism the laissez-faire doctrine...That laissez-faire is false and not sustained by biological precepts I...have abundantly shown.'¹⁰² Hofstadter's choice of Ward as symbolic of the revolt against social Darwinism would seem to hinge on his criticism of laissez-faire economics rather than a strict assessment of his use or misuse of Darwinian theory. Although Ward had

⁹⁹ Bannister, *Social Darwinism*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 53.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰² Edward C. Rafferty, *Apostle of Human Progress: Lester Frank Ward and American Political Thought, 1841-1913* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 271.

‘sundered social principles from simple and direct biological analogies’ and offered an alternative system to that of Sumner, ‘the Spencerian virus remained in his blood.’¹⁰³ Given the centrality of Spencer’s thought to Hofstadter’s social Darwinism, one can assume that this statement was a tacit acceptance that Ward was not completely innocent of the crimes of which Sumner and Spencer were indicted.

The real heroes of the book are the Pragmatists. John Dewey had written of the new intellectual temper that *The Origin of Species* had helped usher in. Ideas of fixity, perfection and permanency were replaced with an appreciation of the ‘indefinite congeries of change.’¹⁰⁴ Evolutionary philosophy, in the hands of William James and Dewey, suggested possibility rather than inevitability. In his review, Cochran points to Hofstadter’s further consideration of the evolutionary approach that ‘brought out that fact that it was a system based on a law of continuous change.’¹⁰⁵ The Pragmatists saw humans and environment as mutually malleable, each accommodating to the demands of the other. The key for Hofstadter was the implication that individuals could alter the course of history. Again, White sounds a note of caution regarding Hofstadter’s assessment and the ease of which the characters fit his model as he suggests Dewey’s anti-individualism and anti-Spencerianism pre-dated any engagement with Darwin.¹⁰⁶

In his final two chapters Hofstadter turned his attention to the Progressive Era. Donald Bellomy has portrayed *Social Darwinism* as a tale of ‘heroic liberals snatching helpless social science from the clutches of vile social Darwinists.’¹⁰⁷ However, Hofstadter was not blind to the ambiguous nature of Progressive views on Darwinism. Progressivism’s use of scientific theory as a means of guiding state action had a darker side. In his study of these tendencies, Hofstadter ‘exposed the creaky intellectual underpinnings of genetically based theories of social development and explored the ideas behind

¹⁰³ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 53, 66.

¹⁰⁴ John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy, and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*, by John Dewey (1910; New York: P. Smith, 1951), 72.

¹⁰⁵ Cochran, “Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*,” 251.

¹⁰⁶ White, “Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*,” 119.

¹⁰⁷ Donald C. Bellomy, “Social Darwinism Revisited,” *Perspectives in American History*, 1 (1984), 27.

racialism and the formidable thinkers...who advanced them.’¹⁰⁸ The replacement of ‘Darwinian individualism’ with ‘Darwinian collectivism’ and the call for greater state intervention had some unexpected consequences. The Progressive embrace of the eugenics movement, combined with the movement’s veneration of the Anglo Saxon would lead to a virulent racism. Hofstadter’s final chapter, ‘Racism and Imperialism’, would see the culmination of these racist tendencies in the expansionist foreign policy of Roosevelt. Thomas Leonard points to the importance and often-neglected influence that *Social Darwinism* had on revisionist accounts of the Progressivism. As he notes, it ‘presaged, with a long delay, the revisionist literature that has debunked the hagiographic portrayal of American Progressive Era reformers that existed.’¹⁰⁹

In his brief conclusion Hofstadter pointed to the dual potentialities of Darwinian thought. He wrote, ‘there was nothing in Darwinism that inevitably made it an apology for competition or force.’¹¹⁰ His attempt to explain the rise of fall of social Darwinism was not fully explicated in the main body of the text. It is in his conclusion that he suggested that ‘changes in the structure of ideas wait on general changes in economic and political life.’¹¹¹ Darwinian thought was used to support the aims and objectives of the dominant forces in society. Whilst capitalism was in the ascendancy, the aggressive individualism of Spencer and Sumner’s philosophy confirmed the central tenets of the day. However, the middle classes’ growing resentment of big business in the later decades of the nineteenth century precipitated a sea change in American thought. As the result of a growing tendency towards reform and collectivism, the use and interpretation of Darwinian theory changed. Hofstadter’s conclusion would seem to confirm the suggestions that the work was an exercise in Beardian analysis. Ideas are seen to serve the interests of society, which in turn are determined by the economic climate of the time. In his conclusion, Hofstadter was careful to affirm the neutrality of Darwinian ideas. Yet social Darwinism continues to remain a term used only

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas C. Leonard, “Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism: The Ambiguous Legacy of Richard Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism in American Thought,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 71 (2009), 49.

¹¹⁰ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 174.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

pejoratively. As Hofstadter suggested, the success of his chapters on Spencer and Sumner meant his analysis was 'overused, over-interpreted, and over-believed.'¹¹²

Curti's influence was felt throughout the study. Hofstadter accepted Curti's maxim that all ideas are social and set out to analyse the link between American society and the reception of Darwinian ideas. In *The Growth of American Thought*, Curti had written that 'the American environment provided congenial soil for the growth of the scientific and evolutionary point of view.'¹¹³ The idea that the success of a particular application of Darwinian theory to social thought was dependant on the social conditions of the time was central to Hofstadter's thesis. Hofstadter would use the same horticultural metaphor when describing Lester Ward's failure to influence his peers, the barrier being that 'the soil was ill prepared' for a positive reception.¹¹⁴ Ward had come two decades too early, whereas the America to which Sumner preached was a perfect representation of the Darwinian struggle for existence he lauded. As Hofstadter concluded, '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.'¹¹⁵ However, it must be noted that Hofstadter's discussion of society's determination of the success of ideas is only really brought into the thesis in the conclusion. He never fully engaged with the relationship between the ideas and their reception. In *Social Ideas*, Curti had written that establishing the link was 'no easy task' as it was almost always 'indirect and subtle.'¹¹⁶ Hofstadter, a young scholar finding his feet as an intellectual historian, had yet to develop the skills that would enable him to fully elucidate the reciprocal relationship.

Hofstadter's previous postgraduate work had seen him focus on biographical material, and the background of the main protagonists in *Social Darwinism* is an issue of key importance to Hofstadter. According to Curti, a man's 'ideas at any period of his life can

¹¹² Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American Thought."

¹¹³ Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 555.

¹¹⁴ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 55.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹¹⁶ Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, xv.

be adequately appreciated only in light of his whole personality.’¹¹⁷ Whilst Hofstadter provided less insight into the personality of the characters, he shared Curti’s interest in how environment coloured social philosophy and how the individual might transcend their background. Those worthy of praise were those intellectually mature enough to break free of the imposition of their upbringing and find a way to impose themselves upon their environment. Spencer is described as a typical ‘product of English industrialism,’ his system being ‘conceived in and dedicated to an age of steel and steam engines, competition, exploitation and struggle.’¹¹⁸ In addition to the impact of the growing industrialism in the world around him, his non-conformist upbringing led to a ‘maniacal hatred of state power.’¹¹⁹ Hofstadter then proceeded to reduce his synthetic philosophy down to ‘an amalgam of...non-conformism and the scientific learning so prominent in his intellectual environment.’¹²⁰ The result was a monolithic system that he imposed on all his ideas of society.

Sumner, like Spencer, was castigated for his failure to break free of his upbringing. His father, an English labourer, had inculcated him with an overriding concern with frugality combined with a strong sense of Protestant virtues. According to Hofstadter, Sumner’s thought only made sense if the reader approached it with an understanding that ‘his ideas were bred in his bones.’¹²¹ These ideas were given substance by his readings in classical economics as a youth. Subsequent conceptions of society, he later confessed, ‘were all formed by those books I read in my boyhood.’¹²² Hofstadter was clear in his view that these early years had conditioned his thought and ensured his ideas remained fixed. Lester Ward, set up as a counterpoint to the figures of Spencer and Sumner, provided a more positive example of intellectual development. Ward’s early years were suffused with poverty and hardship. Yet he managed to educate himself, through hard work and sacrifice, and produce the ‘epoch-making *Dynamic Sociology*.’¹²³ Despite his success in triumphing over the disadvantages of his early

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 22.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 48.

¹²² Ibid., 38.

¹²³ Ibid., 54.

years, his future was still in many ways determined by those struggles. He retained a feeling of perpetual alienation and his self-image as the underdog stayed with him throughout his life. Hofstadter failed to adequately consider the link between individuals and society. As a result, the relationship feels one-sided. The characters' lives are mapped out for them based on their social position.

The question might be asked, given Hofstadter's analysis of the importance of both individual background and the importance of a receptive society, of how he perceived the role of ideas in society. The book was clearly an intellectual history. Indeed, he was criticised for an over-concentration on ideas rather than the social conditions he referred to in his conclusion. He later reflected that he may have 'inadvertently encouraged the "intellectualist fallacy" by exaggerating the impact of ideas without placing them in the social context.'¹²⁴ There is certainly a tension between a book which is dominated by an examination of ideas yet in conclusion suggests that the intellectual had little power to persuade if society were not pre-disposed to accept the message. His failure to examine the factors that determined the acceptance of competing accounts of Darwinian thought and the impact on Darwinian thought itself leaves many questions unanswered. In his introductory chapter, Hofstadter created an image of ideas having an independent existence when he writes that during the Civil War 'ideas that were to transform the Republic began to take root.'¹²⁵ However, it was Hofstadter's stated aim to investigate the reciprocal relationship between ideas and their reception. When he does turn to the role of ideas they are seen as a rationale for previously held beliefs. Conservative thinkers saw fortification in Darwin's conception of gradual modification. Darwinian thought added a new vocabulary to the old doctrine of individualism. The positive impact of ideas seems wholly determinant upon factors divorced from the idea itself. It is in his study of the Pragmatists that we get a fuller picture of his concept of ideas. Hofstadter showed obvious sympathy for the idea the 'theories are experimental instruments rather than answers.'¹²⁶ Hofstadter found in the writing of James and Dewey an antidote to the determinism of Spencerian thought, but also to some degree

¹²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, "Darwinism and Western Thought," in *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner: A Symposium*, ed. Henry L. Paine (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1962) 60.

¹²⁵ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism*, 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

the determinist dilemma to which his own thesis appeared to lead. Pragmatism preached that truth 'happens to an idea' and that the knower 'is not simply a mirror floating.'¹²⁷ There was scope for a meaningful role for intellect.

The role of the intellectual was a subject of great personal importance, and there was a sense within the book that he was attempting to locate his own personal position as an independent thinker. Hofstadter was critical of Darwin for offering 'somewhat confused counsels,' and described *Descent of Man* as being 'written quite complacently.'¹²⁸ It is quite clear that Hofstadter was keen that the intellectual take their responsibility to wider society seriously. But the intellectual sphere also seems one that was clearly delineated as separate from that of politics. He wrote admiringly of a 'few hardy intellectuals' who, during the Civil War, stood above the battle.¹²⁹ This independence of thought was further explored in the chapter on the Pragmatists. Their concentration on culture as environmental and fluid rather than hereditary and fixed was an important break with the dominant thinking of the day. The Pragmatists rebelled against closed systems of thought, as they insisted that ideas be adaptable to the changing patterns of society. Hofstadter's brief membership of the Communist Party had given him first-hand experience of the dangers of rigidity of thought and he saw much to admire in the Pragmatist's intellectual flexibility. He praised James for his 'rebellion against all "block-universe" philosophies, all systems which were finished and executed, impervious to change or choice.'¹³⁰ The rejection of monolithic systems of thought and awareness of complexity had influenced Hofstadter's relationship with radical politics and was shaping his fledgling historical consciousness.

Lester Ward provided an example of an intellectual who had stood against the dominant ideas of his day and paid the price by his alienation. Ward's ideas often went unheard outside his own academic circle as he swam against the tide of popular thought. However, his reward would be that his ideas would prove an important basis for the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 142.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 107.

later, successful attacks on the tenets of social Darwinism. David Brown pushes the analogy too far when he suggests that Hofstadter saw in Ward's alienation from the dominant intellectual opinion, a reflection of his own 'diminishing confidence in the Progressive paradigm'.¹³¹ However, there is no doubt that Hofstadter was attracted to the independence of thought and willingness to challenge dominant modes of thought that Ward displayed. In his review of *Social Darwinism*, Frank Hawkins wrote that 'the author asserts a central interest in the problem posed by determinism.'¹³² Hofstadter could not accept a world in which individuals had no means of altering the course of history. Yet, like James, he realised that this choice was limited. Naturally, Hofstadter struggled to combine the theory that ideas should be instrumental with his awareness that social conditions restricted the ability of an idea to impact on society. This unresolved tension is key to understanding the ambiguities in *Social Darwinism*. More importantly, it is of central importance in considering Hofstadter's own ambivalence regarding both his past radicalism and his future career.

¹³¹ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 32.

¹³² Frank Hawkins, "Review of *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 237 (January 1945), 229.

3

Shifting Ground: *The American Political Tradition*

The completion of Hofstadter's doctoral thesis at Columbia in the spring of 1942 was followed by several anxious months of searching for an academic position. Despite having gained a reputation within Columbia as a young historian of great promise, and being the author of three published articles, Hofstadter approached the summer with the prospect of being without a job for the coming academic year. With his father-in-law's disparaging remarks regarding his future prospects a constant refrain, it was a time of great stress and uncertainty. The fact that positions were in short supply, even for the most talented, was unlikely to have placated the man who had long marked Hofstadter out for failure. Thankfully for Hofstadter, 'an unanticipated offer' from the University of Maryland arrived in the mail that summer.¹ His acceptance of the position of assistant professor marked the beginning of a new chapter for the couple. The job meant not only a move away from the city that they had come to consider home, but also an enforced break in Felice's blossoming career at *Time*. Whilst there appears to have been no hesitation in making the decision to take up the post, it was undoubtedly a wrench for them both to leave behind the intellectual and cultural community which had played such a significant part in their lives.

The Hofstadters moved into a furnished basement flat in mid-Washington, an environment far removed from their home in Brooklyn. Felice summed up their shared sentiment when, just a few months after arriving, she wrote her brother that 'Washington is fascinating to visit or live in for a short time; I don't think I could bear it permanently.'² The early impressions were that life in what Hofstadter described as a 'dull, small southern town' would bring little joy, but must be accepted as a necessary, and temporary, step towards a career back in the Northeast.³ The fact that they arranged to leave their belongings in New York and that Felice took a leave of absence

¹ Richard Kostelanetz, *Master Minds*, 169.

² Felice Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 14, 1942, HSP.

³ David Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 38.

rather than resigning her position suggests that their intention was, from the beginning, to make a return at the earliest opportunity.⁴ Nonetheless, despite both having reservations about life in the capital, they set about making a success of their time there.

Felice, not one to remain passive, continued to write and spent her days working on her second novel. However, she was ill-suited to the solitude that accompanied the daily routine of writing at home and work on the novel soon took a back seat as she commenced a part-time job writing copy for the aviation industry. The role, whilst a far cry from the dynamic environment at *Time*, provided both an outlet for her journalistic talent and an opportunity to make contacts and form new friendships. Much to Hofstadter's displeasure, his daily routine began at 7am. He joked that the morning rush was such that 'time is saved by putting my coffee directly on the shredded wheat instead of drinking it separately in a cup.' After leaving home, he commenced 'the most strenuous part of the day', the bus journey from Washington to College Park. The overcrowded buses, sneering drivers, and the frequently inclement weather all added to the misery of the daily commute. Fortunately, his arrival on the leafy campus brought a sense of calm and the 'pleasant and disciplined students' ensured his time in the classroom was relatively free of stress. He found teaching at Maryland to be undemanding but somewhat lacking in intellectual stimulation. Whilst the students were conscientious, they were 'not clever,' and he remarked that 'nobody who has ever cracked a dictionary in these parts can fail to be considered a giant mind.' His assessment of his faculty colleagues was equally disparaging, and he concluded that 'as friends, the departmental brothers...will not do.'⁵ Clearly the transition from the intellectually vibrant environment of Columbia and the city of New York to the perceived mundanity of his new surroundings was a difficult one.

Whilst Hofstadter had been unimpressed by his colleagues in the history department, a new appointee in sociology caught his eye. He wrote Swados of 'a bright guy my own age, who knows the score.' This 'fantastic boy' was C. Wright Mills, a Wisconsin doctorate who had secured an Associate Professorship at Maryland, a fact that

⁴ Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 175.

⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October 1942, HSP.

Hofstadter confessed to having aroused a degree of envy. Despite his initial criticism of Mills as 'aesthetically rather deficient' and 'sadly addicted to sociological jargon,' he immediately felt a sense of intellectual kinship and the pair formed a close friendship. His fears that he would have to serve his academic apprenticeship alone, in what he deemed to be a provincial backwater, were assuaged by his meeting Mills, and he confessed to feeling that his 'presence here is a relief.'⁶

At first glance, the two young men may seem an unlikely pair. History has cast the two men as opposites, the historian of consensus and the mentor of the New Left, the liberal conservative and the radical. This simplistic portrayal overemphasises the oppugnancy between their views in later years. Mills' thought was not as far removed from mainstream liberal discourse as his popular image suggests, and Hofstadter, despite his status in the academic life of the nation, never lost his outsider's perspective. It is unfortunate that the commonality of their thought and shared intellectual concerns, particularly strong at the outset of their careers, has been lost in the distorted caricature of the two men as polar types.

Despite their differing backgrounds, Mills and Hofstadter arrived at Maryland with a shared sense of their role within both the academic and the wider world. Whilst Mills' immersion in pragmatism was undoubtedly deeper than Hofstadter's and significantly more important in his intellectual formation, it is evident within Hofstadter's work on social Darwinism that the pragmatists also exerted an appreciable influence on his early thinking. Gillam points out that Mills and Hofstadter 'had written strikingly similar dissertations,' underpinned by a faith in what he described as 'the critical ideal.'⁷ Both young men were firm in their belief that the role of the intellectual was one of critical engagement with society, and that ideas, despite their ambiguous and involute relationship with reality, had a power both of themselves and as real instruments of change. This sense of their own role informed their common ambition to reach an audience beyond the confines of their own disciplines.

⁶ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, October, 1942, HSP.

⁷ Richard Gillam, "Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills and 'the Critical Ideal'," *The American Scholar*, 47 (Winter 1978), 72.

The early years of their friendship belie the image of Hofstadter as the archetypal 'New York Intellectual' and Mills as the maverick outsider from Texas who eschewed the New York community of discourse. Whilst at Maryland, it was Mills who was more closely associated with the New York intellectuals and he became a regular contributor to a number of the city's left-wing magazines. Hofstadter seems to have been as impressed by the fact that Mills had been published in *Partisan Review* as he was of his associate professorship. For Hofstadter, publication in a scholarly journal was a significant step in an academic career, but publication in *Partisan Review* was a sign of true intellectual significance. Elisabeth Earley remarked that 'when *Partisan Review* came out, Dick always went into a depression, because these were the people he admired and his feeling seemed to be...that he would never be there.'⁸ Mills was already making strides in his attempts to marry his academic interests and political concerns, and to communicate his message to a wider public. However, Hofstadter's time was yet to come, and the prospect of taking up the role of public intellectual still seemed a distant hope rather than a realistic expectation.

For both men political radicalism was an essential component of their vision of the role of the intellectual and their own function in wider society. In the early years of their friendship, there was a great deal of agreement on political issues, as both men made their critical observations from what Hofstadter described as 'the most thoroughgoing leftist pt of view.'⁹ The sharp divergence in their later views owes much to differences in personal temperament. However, of greater significance is the fact they had arrived at a radical position by very different routes. As a consequence, it was almost inevitable that these routes would take them to separate destinations. Hofstadter's radicalism, like that of the New York Intellectuals, had its origins in the Depression years and was shaped equally by Marxist theory and involvement in the political debates of the period. He had felt the initial hope and excitement of revolutionary possibility, but this optimism had been replaced by disillusionment and alienation. Mills had come to radicalism late. As he explained, 'I did not personally experience "the thirties". At the time, I just didn't get

⁸ Elisabeth Earley, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, August 19, 1943, HSP.

its mood.’¹⁰ He had not been a member of the Communist Party, nor had he engaged seriously with Marxism. Instead, Mills discovered radicalism through his studies rather than through active politics. He had not felt the despair of broken dreams, nor was he burdened by past memories. As a result, his radicalism, unrestrained by political dogma or party affiliation, grew stronger as Hofstadter’s appetite for political engagement waned. Nevertheless, despite their differing paths, Hofstadter and Mills met at a time when their political trajectories were intersecting, and they spent their lunchtimes discussing and agreeing on the political issues of the day.

Mills introduced Hofstadter to Kenneth Stamp and Frank Freidel, both new appointments in history who had completed their doctorates at Wisconsin under the supervision of William B. Hesseltine. They shared Hofstadter and Mills’ radicalism and joined the lunchtime conversations. Hofstadter relished the intellectual and social camaraderie, and wrote enthusiastically of how the four men would ‘sit around and tear sandwiches and bitterly denounce Churchill, FD, the State Dept., the military, capitalism, southerners, and all possible aspects of the status quo.’¹¹ Whilst he found little joy in his teaching role, this small fraternity of radical spirits provided an intellectual oasis within the staid and conservative atmosphere of wartime Maryland.

The lunchtime meetings were often extended to Friday night sessions, in which the friends would discuss politics until the early hours of the morning. However, their radicalism was not confined solely to conversation. In the spring of 1943, the four friends attempted to organize opposition to the administration within the campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors. President Byrd had moved the university from a two-semester system to one spanning three semesters, without increases in pay for the faculty. A further proposal to increase the teaching load from twelve to eighteen hours prompted the four to take action. Hofstadter admitted that attempts to organise a faculty revolt were ‘hopeless’ but took a degree of satisfaction that they had managed to take control of an AAUP meeting at which Byrd

¹⁰ Cited in Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 60.

¹¹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, August 19, 1943, HSP.

had been invited to speak. With the help of four co-conspirators they had managed to put Byrd 'on the coals for almost two hours.'¹² He proved an evasive target, but they managed to ensure a resolution was passed to allow a faculty investigation into Army contracts obtained by the university.

Hofstadter's arrival in Washington had coincided with the intensification of military preparations and the war began to dominate life both on and off campus. Large numbers of soldiers arrived on campus under the War Department's Army Specialized Training Program and Hofstadter was obliged to teach four army classes. Although he conceded, 'It is not at all as dismal as I thought', the standard of the students and the fact that he was teaching the same topics for twelve hours a week brought little by way of professional satisfaction.¹³ Furthermore, the coming of war had a more pressing and personal implication for Hofstadter. Whilst Stamp and Friedel had gained draft deferments due to having young children, and Mills due to hypertension, Hofstadter had been classified 1-A, meaning he was available for military service. His feelings on the prospect of serving are in some ways reminiscent of his uncertainty towards joining the Communist Party. Despite his distaste for the military and obvious concern at the idea of being drafted, he also felt some obligation to be involved and to take part in what might prove to be a defining moment for his generation. As had been the case when considering his position within the radical movement, he was torn between the desire to act, and his natural predilection for contemplation and a disinclination to take action that was not wholly consistent with his personal beliefs. He had found his earlier inability to take political action troubling, and was now faced with a similar dilemma.

Whilst his colleagues shared both the security of deferment and the stridency of their opposition to the war, Hofstadter's position was more complicated. Although Friedel described Hofstadter as being less anti-military and more 'ready to go along with the war effort,' it was a position that had been reached not on principle but after careful consideration and a logical assessment of the situation.¹⁴ Events in Europe had

¹² Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, August 19, 1943, HSP.

¹³ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, July 15, 1943, HSP.

¹⁴ Frank Freidel, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

convinced him that non-interventionism, whilst appearing to be the ethical stance, failed to engage with the reality that the world faced. The prospect of personal involvement made the conflict between the principled and the pragmatic standpoint all the more evident. His measured support for military intervention did not indicate a desire to play a role in the battle. This ambivalence was evident when he explained that, '[I] think I really ought to let myself be drafted. But I am slightly more afraid of what the army wd do to me than I am of missing the whole experience of war.'¹⁵ The fear of having to join the army was evidently stronger than his belief in the necessity of military action. It is not surprising that Hofstadter, who sought always to avoid conflict in his personal life, should find the idea of being forced to fight terrifying. Yet he continued to feel uneasy at his own perceived asceticism and to wrestle with the fear that life was futile without action. In August 1943, he declared, 'I wd like to see something. If I have to expose myself morally that's too bad.'¹⁶ However, this desire to act, at least militarily, was short-lived and the decision to appeal his classification was arrived at with significantly more haste than had his membership of the Party.¹⁷

The enduring feeling that the world was passing him by was further compounded by the dissatisfaction with his work. In a letter of August 19, 1943, he complained, 'I'm awfully tired teaching stale history to adolescents at a time when the world is being torn up.' Despite the intellectual companionship outside the classroom, he felt increasingly frustrated by the sterility of life at Maryland. He summed up his sense of isolation when he wrote Swados, 'there is no kind of decay worse than the kind that comes from sheer lack of experience of anything that can be called life.' As a student he had worried about his inactivity and position on the periphery of the revolutionary movement. At Maryland, he felt not only alienated from politics, but from life itself.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, July 15, 1943, HSP.

¹⁶ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, August 19, 1943, HSP.

¹⁷ Hofstadter successfully appealed his draft status. In a letter to Merle Curti on April 25, 1944, he explained, 'I have been rejected by the army...on account of my various digestive troubles and my allergies.'

¹⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, August 19, 1943, HSP.

His despondency made him all the more determined to make his escape, and to do so he needed to further strengthen his academic profile. An essay, entitled “William Leggett: Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy,” printed in the December 1943 issue of *Political Science Quarterly*, was the first step to publishing his way back to the Northeast. Hofstadter’s study of Leggett, the ‘intellectual leader of the New York Locofoco movement’, was an attempt to bring a man who had suffered ‘undeserved neglect’ by historians back to the forefront of New York politics in the period.¹⁹ According to Hofstadter, Leggett had a ‘significance far out of proportion to his small direct influence’ and his political journalism, both as associate editor of the *New York Evening Post* and his own paper, the *Plaindealer*, ‘had considerable effect on democratic practice.’²⁰ An independent and uncompromising mind, he chose not to seek office and favoured the role of political agitator on the radical wing of Jacksonian Democracy. The stridency of his views and the acerbity of his editorials led his political opponents to denounce him as a ‘knave’, whose writing was both ‘slandorous’ and ‘dastardly’.²¹ Hofstadter wished to look behind the rhetorical excesses that gave Leggett’s thought the appearance of being profoundly revolutionary, and to uncover the substance of his ideas.

Leggett came to prominence during a period of rapid economic change and within a political environment that was in a state of turmoil. The existing political frameworks and party machines had not been designed to cope with the challenge of the politicized masses. It appeared that Leggett was attuned to these new forces and his political philosophy, rooted in the principle of equal rights, moved him to become an outspoken critic of the banks and supporter of labour unions. Whilst he was not alone in his sympathy for the labouring classes, his editorials condemning slavery were considered ‘dangerously subversive.’ Yet, as Hofstadter notes, despite his seeming radicalism, his social philosophy was firmly rooted in tradition. Beneath the mordacious rhetoric, his principles were formulated of a ‘few well-hallowed elements: laissez-faire liberalism, the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence and strict construction

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, “William Leggett: Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, (December 1943), 582.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 581.

of the Constitution.²² The rootedness of his thought was most clearly evident in his economic theory. For Leggett, the plight of the workers was caused by their inability to acquire the means to finance their own business enterprises and to compete on a level playing field. It was not reform or regulation that he sought, but rather fair access to an expanding free market. The natural equilibrium of society had been disrupted by the concentration of wealth and opportunity and the inherent balance of the laissez-faire economy must be restored. Leggett believed that political democracy depended wholly on the unhindered workings of the free market. In this respect, he was far from radical.²³

Hofstadter's study of Leggett was an indication of his increasing interest in the nation's liberal political tradition. His previous writing had a strong biographical focus and the work on Leggett presaged his use of the lens of biography to give focus to his critique of liberalism. Hofstadter castigated Leggett for his 'failure to assign any of the hardships of his day to the inherent disorders of a growing economic system,' and his unshakeable faith in the natural order of a free market society. This criticism of Leggett's inability to break free of traditional modes of thought, or to re-evaluate his principles in light of a rapidly changing world, foreshadowed Hofstadter's later appraisal of liberalism's ossified beliefs. Leggett's 'fatal weakness' was that he 'had no conception of history as an evolutionary process.' It seemed that Leggett, despite the radicalism of much of his criticism, was bound by a political philosophy too fixed to provide the radical solutions necessary in a changing society.²⁴

The essay also anticipated Hofstadter's uncovering of the paranoid mind within the reform movement. He suggested that Leggett's failure to address the real cause of inequity was due to 'his tendency to trace all difficulties to an evil conspiracy on the part of the rich and well born.'²⁵ This association of the reform impulse with the tendency to see society's ills as the result of the secret machinations of its enemies drew significant criticism when it appeared in his later work on the Populists. Dixon Ryan Fox's

²² Ibid., 585.

²³ Ibid., 593.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

comment that Leggett 'was not alone in his conspiracy theory of trouble. We can still find it exiting on every side,' was an indication of the objections that he would later face.²⁶ What Hofstadter described as the 'novel and provocative' effect of his work was just starting to emerge.²⁷ It would soon ensure his position at the forefront of his profession.

The gloom of the first year at Maryland was lifted somewhat by some good news in the spring of 1943, as the couple discovered they were to be parents. There is no record of Hofstadter's feelings about the prospect of fatherhood, and the pregnancy is mentioned only once in his correspondence with Swados, and only when prompted by Felice. His update on the progress was delivered with typical droll humour, as he wrote of his wife's 'swelling' size and advised, 'if you want to be a father don't do it with any girl you are married to.'²⁸ Dan's birth on December 19 was reported in an equally playful and understated manner. He informed his brother-in-law that 'the brat' was fine and that the 'four-day old vegetable' had his nose and mouth but Felice's facial shape. He signed off by noting that he took 'great pleasure in looking at the boy twice a day.'²⁹ Whilst his reaction to the birth of his son might seem a little unenthusiastic, the letter's jocular tone must be viewed in light of his characteristically light-hearted exchanges with Swados.

Amidst the humour, there was a note of seriousness in the letter, as Hofstadter recounted that it had been a long and painful labour for Felice. He admitted that his overriding emotion was 'chiefly one of terrific relief that she's all right in every respect.'³⁰ However, Hofstadter's relief at the apparent ease of the pregnancy was short-lived as Felice was forced to spend much of the following month in hospital due to spinal pain. Exploratory surgery showed a 'long, embryonic cyst' in her back that doctors advised would require an operation and a significant stay in hospital.³¹ The decision

²⁶ Dixon Ryan Fox to Hofstadter, January 17, 1944, RHP, Catalogued Correspondence.

²⁷ Hofstadter, "The Great Depression & American History."

²⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, July 15, 1943, HSP.

²⁹ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, December 27, 1943, HSP.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Felice to Harvey Swados, January 15, 1944, HSP.

was made to delay what was expected to be a standard procedure for six months. The new date conveniently coincided with the university's summer break and allowed Felice to settle Dan into a routine in his early months.

Despite the concern about the upcoming operation the couple were excitedly making plans for the future. Their move from Washington to a rented apartment Hyattsville, closer to the university and their friends, was intended to be a temporary one. Felice was awaiting the announcement of the Guggenheim Fellowship awards to which she had applied for study in Europe for a year, and Hofstadter was in contact with Columbia professor, John Allen Krout, about a possible position at Smith College.³² In addition, representatives from *Newsweek* had been in contact with Felice over the resumption of her career and return to New York.³³ There was a real sense of hope that their time in Maryland was coming to an end. However, their optimism was shattered just a couple of months before the operation was scheduled, when Felice discovered a lump near her waist. The diagnosis was devastating: she was suffering from liver cancer.

As soon as the spring semester finished the couple and young son returned to the Swados family home in Buffalo. The prognosis for liver cancer was particularly poor in 1944, and there is no record of Felice receiving treatment for her illness.³⁴ Instead she seems to have been nursed at home by both Hofstadter and her parents. Despite the concern that a Buffalo winter would be too cold, it soon became clear that she would be too ill to return to Maryland, and Hofstadter took a leave of absence for the academic year 1944-45 to continue her care. Whilst she continued to remain cheery when updating her brother and friends back in Maryland of Dan's progress, she was enduring considerable pain and discomfort. Her innate strength of character ensured she continued to find the courage to struggle on. However, as Mills reported to his parents, in December 1944 this 'very talented and lovely creature' was slowly passing away.³⁵

³² Felice to Harvey Swados, February 16, 1944, HSP; John Allen Krout to Hofstadter, May 16, 1944, RHP, Box 6.

³³ Felice to Harvey Swados, February 16, 1944, HSP.

³⁴ Edwin Silverberg and Arthur I. Holleb, "Major Trends in Cancer: 25 Year Survey," *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*, 25 (January 1, 1975), 5.

³⁵ C. Wright Mills to Frances and Charles Grover Mills, December 22, 1944, in *C Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 82.

Hofstadter did not speak of the toll of caring for his dying wife and young child, but it was undoubtedly a time of immeasurable distress. His one refuge from the pain, as it would continue to be throughout his life, was his writing. Alfred Kazin recalled that Hofstadter had told him that he would write in the dark as he sat watching over Felice. The act of writing was more than a distraction; it became 'a kind of therapy.'³⁶ The publication, in the fall of 1944, of *Social Darwinism*, was a welcome fillip, and he began work on a book of essays. Further good news was received when John Allen Krout informed him that there would be opportunities to return to Columbia in the near future. Krout wrote Hofstadter, 'My own guess is that you will not remain long at the University of Maryland...I feel sure that this Department will strongly support you for a more important place in the historical field.'³⁷ The possibility of a life back in New York was exactly what he and Felice had hoped for. Tragically, it was not a dream that they would be able to share.

In late July 1945, Felice died. Whilst the protracted nature of the illness may have allowed him to prepare psychologically and emotionally for her death, it was unlikely to have lessened the pain. Now, at the age of twenty-eight, Hofstadter had lost both his mother and his wife. His response to his mother's death had been to forget, but his reaction to Felice's death is harder to determine. Both Baker and Brown remark on his silence. Brown suggests Felice 'began to disappear from his correspondence' in the months leading up to her death. He also deems it noteworthy that Hofstadter's short response to Stamp's condolence letter gave little indication of grief and, instead, it emphasized a desire to resume his writing. Brown is not explicit about what is to be read into the lack of a public expression of grief, and it would be injudicious to suggest anything other than a desire to deal with his loss privately. Baker's citing of the amnesia in the wake of his mother's death is perhaps the more telling reference. As he had attempted to control and minimise the impact of his earlier tragedy, so he determined,

³⁶ Alfred Kazin, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

³⁷ John Allen Krout to Hofstadter, October 19, 1944, RHP, Box 20.

in the wake of Felice's death, to immerse himself in his writing and to look forward rather than to dwell on the past.³⁸

Understandably, Felice's death was a key moment in the life of the young historian. Hofstadter, only recently a father and in the embryonic stages of an academic career, was tasked with bringing up a one-and-a-half year old child alone. He was also faced, at least for a while, with returning to a city and job that brought little cheer. However, despite the obvious pain and grief of losing his wife, Kazin has suggested that Felice's death proved a liberating experience for Hofstadter. Kazin claimed 'Dick was quite unhappy with her, and as it happened, I knew him afterwards, of course, and his personal life took a much better turn when he thought that he was no longer under that pressure.'³⁹ Whilst Kazin's assessment may seem grossly insensitive, he is not alone in suggesting that Felice's death marked a turning point in Hofstadter's life and career. Bruce Kuklick makes this point when he writes of Hofstadter having two lives. The first was coloured by the radicalism of Felice, the second coincides with his giving up of political commitments and his settling into the professorial life.⁴⁰

The distinction between the radical and professional Hofstadter and its coinciding with the death of Felice is an oversimplification. Indeed, both sides of Hofstadter were clearly on show, prior to Felice's death, during the controversy over the AHA presidential nomination of Carlton Hayes. Hofstadter, despite being in Buffalo, became embroiled in Stamp and Friedel's attempts to block Hayes's election on the grounds of his alleged support of Franco. Political and professional concerns seemed perfectly in unison, as Hofstadter joined historians from Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois and Chicago in signing a petition to put forward an alternative to Hayes. However, the realisation that several influential historians, including those at Columbia, had refused to support the action prompted him to have second thoughts. Hofstadter found himself caught between his friends, with whom he agreed on the need for political commitment, and his mentors who he hoped might invite him back to Columbia. The political and the

³⁸ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 48; Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 182.

³⁹ Alfred Kazin, *Richard Hofstadter Project*.

⁴⁰ Bruce Kuklick, "Review of David Brown's *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 42 (2006), 576.

professional concerns had suddenly diverged and Hofstadter seemed to be more concerned with protecting his future career than standing by his political ideals. Understandably his prevarication caused dismay amongst his colleagues in Maryland. Hofstadter justified his actions by explaining that the psychological impact of Felice's illness and the associated depression had led him to paralysis. It was not uncharacteristic for Hofstadter to feel a sense of inertia when faced with competing concerns. He characterized his sense of ambivalence, when he described himself to Stamp as being a conservative by nature despite his radical temperament. His desire to act failed to match his wish to avoid conflict.⁴¹

During Felice's illness, Hofstadter had published a second major article, "U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend", a critical appraisal of the work of the nation's preeminent historian of slavery. Phillips dedicated his career to the study of the South, and his portrayal of the slave system, most clearly represented in *American Negro Slavery* and *Life and Labor in the Old South*, became the accepted one. As Hofstadter declared in his introduction, 'No single writer had been more influential in establishing patterns of belief about the plantation system.' The essay was a return to the task of reappraising the historical interpretations of the progressive historians, and to call into question their central assumptions. Whilst there had clearly been a degree of respect for the work of both Beard and Parrington, Hofstadter's assessment of Phillips was significantly less sympathetic. Hofstadter saw Phillips as a propagandist who, whilst he 'did not originate the plantation legend of the Old South...did his best to continue it.'⁴²

Hofstadter's primary criticism of Phillips was his choice of evidence. The concentration on the largest plantations, 'the upper crust of the upper crust', led Phillips to base his thesis on sources that were unrepresentative. This was not a fact of which Phillips was unaware. Yet, he was determined that the particularity of his evidence would not restrict the universality of his conclusion that the paternalistic system of bondage was an essentially benevolent institution. Whilst Hofstadter acknowledged the temptation

⁴¹ Baker, *Radical Beginnings*, 180-81.

⁴² Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1918); Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1929); Hofstadter, "U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.29 (April 1944), 109-10.

for the historian to make use of the evidence most readily available, he condemned Phillips for making a selection that was so clearly 'governed by personal bias.' His 'intellectual resistance' to an engagement with material that was seen to contradict his roseate depiction of master-slave relations was indicative of a mind formed within the same Southern tradition and culture of which he wrote. As Hofstadter remarked, Phillips 'was a native of Georgia, to whom the Southern past always appeared in a haze of romance.'⁴³

Hofstadter was not insensitive to the imprint of the individual on the work of the history and admitted that his own works were often personal documents. However, he could not accept what he saw as Phillips' complete disregard for the detachment of the historian. He concluded that Phillips' 'books can best be placed in the course of our intellectual history when it is realized that they represent a latter-day phase of the pro-slavery argument.'⁴⁴ It is unsurprising that Hofstadter, a generation younger and a product of the urban East Coast, would find Phillips' sympathetic appraisal of slavery unpalatable. However, Brown is right to note the significance of Hofstadter's own regionalism on his assessment of Phillips.⁴⁵ His social, political and intellectual background ensured he had little in common with historians like Phillips. Furthermore, his time in Maryland had increased his sense of distaste for Southern traditions and culture. The strength of his anti-Southern sentiment is evident in his discussion of the lack of soldiers in his classes that came from the region. In a letter to Swados, he opined that 'it must be because the scum couldn't meet the grades in competitive tests.'⁴⁶ Whilst there is undoubtedly a degree of flippancy to his statement, it clearly underlines his sense of antipathy towards the South. His correspondence during the period was frequently adorned with asides denouncing the region for its racism and anti-intellectualism. Unable to speak out as he might have wished to within his own institution, and with an ever-increasing sense of disenchantment with his position, Hofstadter found in his writing, a means to vent his ire.

⁴³ Ibid., 120-23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 46.

⁴⁶ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, July 15, 1943, HSP.

With a growing reputation and body of published work, Hofstadter applied for a Knopf History Fellowship to which he intended to provide chapters on Lincoln and Hoover from his work in progress, 'Men and Ideas in American Politics.' Whilst he entered the competition without expectation of success, his reputation, particularly amongst the Columbia faculty, ensured his application was supported by a number of the nation's leading historians. Both Harry Carman and Henry Steel Commager wrote to Knopf with the assessment that Hofstadter was 'the ablest of the younger generation' of historians in the field of intellectual history. Merle Curti added his support by declaring that 'Hofstadter is the first candidate for a fellowship that I can genuinely recommend with absolutely no qualifications. He really has everything.' The references also spoke directly to Knopf's concern that the work produced would be one that was marketable. Hofstadter's ability as a 'literary craftsman,' ability to transcend 'the factual level of many historians' and 'flare for suggestive interpretations,' was sure to mean the book would have 'a very considerable general appeal.' The strong backing of these eminent historians ensured Hofstadter's application was a strong one.⁴⁷

Alfred Knopf, himself a Columbia graduate and friend, as well as publisher of several of the faculty, was suitably impressed by the strength of his references, and offered Hofstadter the opportunity to write a biography of Benjamin Silliman. However, Hofstadter declined the invitation and informed Knopf that he wished to continue with the work he had commenced. The two chapters were submitted to the contest and when the committee sat they concluded that Hofstadter's application was 'the outstanding submission' of the year.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, despite the obvious talent displayed, Knopf remained dubious that a collection of essays would achieve notable sales figures, and the committee made the decision to split the award between Hofstadter and R. Carlyle Buley of Indiana. Rather than bemoan the fact that he had only been awarded a share of the prize and the associated research stipend, Hofstadter was delighted by the news. As he wrote in his letter of thanks to Curti, 'Half is still a goodly

⁴⁷ Harry Carman to Alfred Knopf, April 16, 1945; Henry Steele Commager to Knopf, May 4, 1945; Curti to Knopf, April 20, 1945; Richard Shryock to Knopf, April 18, 1945, Knopf Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 30.

⁴⁸ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 47.

sum.⁴⁹ His financial situation had become precarious due to the payment of medical bills and the loss of income from teaching during the summer, and the announcement of any award was both welcome and needed. His sense of relief was palpable as he confided, 'I couldn't figure how I was going to make it,' but 'this has given me a little lift and has taken a terrible worry off my shoulders.'⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, the financial assistance was of immediate importance. However, the publication of the book by Knopf would prove even more meaningful. These initial two chapters of what would become *The American Political Tradition* cemented a relationship that would ensure Hofstadter's publishing future for the duration of his career.

Early the following year, Hofstadter received the job offer that he had been desperately hoping for. At the end of 1945, Columbia had commenced a search for 'someone who can really take hold of intellectual history.' Curti turned down the opportunity to return to Columbia and the position was offered to Hofstadter.⁵¹ A full-time post within the History Department provided more than just job security. It afforded him the opportunity to return to the city and the university that he felt was his intellectual home. Whilst he was still coming to terms with life without Felice and the responsibility of bringing up his son alone, the future was beginning to look brighter. By May 1946, he confirmed, 'I feel somewhat more in the clear emotionally now than I have for a long time.'⁵² The prospect of taking up his new position at Columbia seems also to have given him a renewed enthusiasm for his work and optimism regarding its worth. As he praised Curti for his continued desire to write meaningful history, he expressed his belief that, 'we have to go on working and teaching as tho our efforts certainly counted in the world's balance, and hope that they will.'⁵³ With only a few more months to work 'in the dark, isolated caverns of Maryland,' he could look forward with excitement to working within an environment that would encourage rather than hinder his development as a historian.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Hofstadter to Merle Curti, Undated (1945), Merle Curti Papers.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Neil Jumonville, *Henry Steel Commager*, 53.

⁵² Hofstadter to Merle Curti, May 18, 1946, Merle Curti Papers.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hofstadter to Alfred Knopf, April 19 1946, Knopf Papers, Box 30.

After spending the summer with Dan in Buffalo, Hofstadter returned to New York City and to Columbia University, the city and institution that would remain his home until his death. With his professional life secured, Hofstadter was keen to rebuild his personal life. His marriage in January 1947 to Beatrice Kevitt, a Buffalo native whom he had met during the summer, and Dan's arrival in New York six weeks later, marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life. As Brown described, 'In the eighteen months following Felice's death the resonance of past places and past relationships began to grow less audible.' Unlike Kuklick and Kazin, Brown is careful not to overplay the significance of Felice's death in Hofstadter's intellectual and political trajectory. Nonetheless, he does propose that the period marked something of a change in outlook, as Hofstadter left behind the radical thirties and shifted towards the liberal fifties.⁵⁵ It is undoubted that his appointment at Columbia, and the publishing agreement for his book with Knopf brought him into contact with new influences, and renewed his faith in the possibilities of an academic career. However, to suggest that his course was set would be to misjudge the strength of his independence of mind.

Hofstadter's initial priority after taking up his new post was to complete the manuscript of his book of essays. Behind schedule, he had assured Knopf that the move would allow him to work more effectively than had been the case in Maryland. He was true to his promise and had completed a first draft by the spring of the following year. However, the publisher's impression of the first draft of what was then entitled, 'Men and Ideas in American Life' was less than positive. Harold Strauss, his editor, reported, 'I don't believe I have ever come across a writer who has managed to be as exorbitantly dull and as electrically intelligent within the compass of a single book.' Whilst there were moments 'that approach genius', the rather damning conclusion was that 'the footnotes throughout are more interesting than the text.' To Hofstadter's credit, he acknowledged the criticism with good grace, and thanked Strauss for his 'perceptive reading'. Within just four months of receiving Strauss' report, he had re-written all but a few of the chapters, and produced a draft that was felt to be 'a most excellent job.' A period in hospital, the publisher's demand for a unifying introduction, and disagreements over the

⁵⁵ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 49.

title delayed the publication, but finally, in the fall of 1948, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* went into print.⁵⁶

An early draft of Hofstadter's introduction, written after completion of the essays, gives a remarkable insight into his original intention for the work. He indicated that his primary aim was not to search for a broad interpretation of the American political tradition, but rather to examine the thought and character of a selection of the nation's most influential political leaders. In doing so, he wished to dispense with the familiar interpretations in favour of portraits that brought the neglected aspects of the nation's past to the fore. It was not a typical work of political portraiture, and he did not intend to produce exhaustive biographical accounts of his subjects. Instead, he saw his sketches as those of the historical caricaturist, the essays marked by the deliberate exaggeration of those features he deemed salient. If he were to choose a unifying theme, it was simply a desire to search out 'the important and unfamiliar.'⁵⁷ What Hofstadter deemed to be important was, of course, reflective of his own intellectual and political position in the middle years of the 1940s. Although published towards the end of that decade, Hofstadter commenced work on the book in 1943 and later described the work as a product of the ideological debates and social criticism of the 1930s.

The continued radicalism, albeit outside active politics, of Hofstadter's years at Maryland provide an essential backdrop to the essays contained within *The American Political Tradition*. It was a work conceived from a vantage point well to the left, and reflective of Hofstadter's sense of detachment from mainstream politics. His distaste for the political system was writ large in his draft introduction. Hofstadter saw American political history as a story of competing dramas in which the lead actors were those politicians, often dynamic and personally appealing, whose performances captured the hearts of the nation. As with a theatrical production, successful political campaigns were thoughtfully staged, carefully timed and always sensitive to the tastes and prejudices of the public. The debates over policies were adjudged to be mere gestures,

⁵⁶ Harold Strauss, 'Reader's Report', dated 6 June 1947; Hofstadter to Strauss, August 28, 1947; Strauss to Hofstadter, October 3, 1947, Knopf Papers, Box 30.

⁵⁷ Draft introduction to *The American Political Tradition*, RHP, Box 3.

created to give the illusion of reality. It was an illusion that entranced not only the majority of the voting public but, to Hofstadter's dismay, most historians. They had too readily succumbed to the spell of the drama and too often accepted the 'dramatic values intended by the authors of the script, transfer[red] the fictions of the stage to the printed page, and hand[ed] them to posterity.'⁵⁸

In contrast, Hofstadter saw his own writing as that of one who watched the political drama from a position 'in the wings'. From there, he could observe the actors behind the characters and analyse the inner workings of the production rather than simply view the performance on stage. His essays would tear away the masks behind which the historical actors hid themselves from public view. The resultant work was one that was intensely critical and unsparing in its assessment of the nation's political leaders.

Hofstadter's primary aim was to challenge both historical orthodoxy and popular mythology, and he was uncompromising in his judgments. His chapter on Thomas Jefferson was reflective of the mordancy with which he set about the task. Of Jefferson, he observed that the 'mythology...is as massive and imposing as any in American history.'⁵⁹ Despite abundant scholarship that deflated the roseate image of Jefferson, much of which Hofstadter consulted in his study, the myth persisted. As Hofstadter remarked scathingly, 'no aristocrat... could be quite the democrat Jefferson imagined himself.'⁶⁰ Yet, to Hofstadter's dismay, the popular characterization of Jefferson as a crusading democrat retained its force. Likewise, 'the Lincoln legend has come to have a hold on the American imagination that defies comparison with anything else in political mythology.' In the case of Lincoln, 'the first author of the legend...was Lincoln himself.'⁶¹ Lincoln had been fully aware of his role as an exemplar of the possibilities for the simplest of men and he ensured he performed it masterfully.

⁵⁸ Draft introduction to *The American Political Tradition*.

⁵⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition And The Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 93, 94.

The mythology that Hofstadter seemed most keen to deflate was that surrounding Franklin D. Roosevelt. His earlier work on the sharecroppers had been a critical assessment of the darker political reality that lay behind Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives, and his assessment in *The American Political Tradition* was, in many ways, informed by the same radical impulse. The book written, in what Hofstadter described as 'the afterglow of the New Deal and the reform impulse,' was coloured by the painful experience of the Depression years.⁶² In his student days Hofstadter had liked to amuse his friends with sardonic parodies of Roosevelt, and he retained much of his contempt for the revered president. Hofstadter bemoaned the fact that 'Roosevelt is bound to be the dominant figure in the mythology of any resurgent liberalism.' It was undoubted that 'there were ample texts for men of good will to feed upon,' but he urged caution in putting faith in 'the wonder-working powers of the great man.'⁶³ The Roosevelt myth was the most dangerous to the project of revitalizing liberalism.

Throughout the essays, Hofstadter was keen to remind his readers of the incompatibility of the virtues assigned these mythic figures with the dirty work of politics. Jefferson is described as too successful a politician to be 'the crusading democrat of...legend.'⁶⁴ Lincoln was 'completely the politician by preference and training' who had learned 'the deliberate and responsible opportunism' necessary for success.⁶⁵ He is portrayed as a man whose ideas and beliefs remained secondary to political strategy. Indeed, his success in 1860 entitled him 'to a place among the world's great political propagandists.'⁶⁶ For those who had heralded Roosevelt as the great liberal saviour, Hofstadter counselled them to consider that his turn to the left had been motivated solely by political gain. When one scraped beneath the surface of the myths surrounding politicians one always found the murky underbelly of political motivation.

As Hofstadter lifted the masks from the nation's leaders he was struck by the clear discrepancies between their pronouncements and their practices. He wrote of Jefferson

⁶² Richard Hofstadter, "The Winds of Historical Doctrine," KLRU-TEMP Videotape Collection.

⁶³ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 352.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95, 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

that he must 'be measured in whole, not in part, in action as well as thought.' Despite his Enlightenment ideas, he 'was not in the habit of breaking lances trying to fulfil them.'⁶⁷ The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt was characterized by 'a hundred times more noise than accomplishment.'⁶⁸ Woodrow Wilson was forced to 'turn his back on his deepest values,' as he led the nation into World War One.⁶⁹ F.D.R.'s failure to purge his party of its conservative elements was symbolic of 'the political bankruptcy of the New Deal.'⁷⁰ Hofstadter presented the nation's political heroes as men inhabiting a moral and intellectual twilight, masters of manipulation and deception, cloaked beneath a charade of the highest integrity. Indeed, Wendell Phillips was the only figure within the book who refused to compromise his ideals. Instead he preferred to keep his eye on the 'ultimate potentialities', irrespective of the restraints, or personal cost.⁷¹ In the one positive portrayal in the book, we find a man unencumbered by political office, and prepared to present himself to the public naked and unmasked.

In *Desolation and Enlightenment*, Ira Katznelson situates Hofstadter firmly within a group of intellectuals he describes as the 'political studies enlightenment.'⁷² In Katznelson's analysis, Hofstadter sits at the intersection between history and social science and plays a pivotal role in the group's attempts to define the new terms of discourse required to understand the post-war world. *American Political Tradition* was written and published when the group was in its infancy and it is perhaps an overstatement to view the work as a product of their concerns. Nonetheless, there are indications that Hofstadter was incorporating the insights of others within the group, particularly his engagement with the psychological factors in political action. In *Social Darwinism*, Hofstadter had commenced what Singal describes as 'a lifelong quest to comprehend the relationship between politics and ideas in America.'⁷³ Whilst Hofstadter's initial attempt to uncover the relationship between ideas and social environment had taken much of its impetus from his mentor, Curti, *American Political*

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24, 25.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 228.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 271.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 342.

⁷¹ Ibid., 139.

⁷² Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁷³ Daniel Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," 978.

Tradition marked the beginning, albeit tentative, of a concern for those factors that lay deep in the psyche of the individuals.

Whilst writing *American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter had commenced his search for a more compelling foundation for explanations of political motivation. Although he does not reference Harold Lasswell, another of those thinkers within Katznelson's 'political science enlightenment', his presence is clearly felt.⁷⁴ In *Psychopathology and Politics*, first published in 1930, Lasswell wrote that 'our conventional schemes of "political motivation" seem curiously aloof from the manifold reality of human life.'⁷⁵ Hofstadter was clearly in agreement.

Lasswell identified three personality types that he saw as being predominant in the realm of politics. The classifications of the theorist, administrator, and agitator were represented in their purest form by Karl Marx, Herbert Hoover, and the Old Testament prophets.⁷⁶ It is striking how closely Hofstadter's portrayal of John Calhoun fits Lasswell's model of the theorist. Indeed, Hofstadter chooses to describe Calhoun as the 'Marx of the Master Class'. Whilst Hofstadter makes the association due to Calhoun's appreciation of the importance of class and social structure, Lasswell's description of Marx as the arch-theorist would not have been lost on him. According to Hofstadter, Calhoun was a 'brilliant but highly abstract and isolated intellect,' who sought to interpret life through logic.⁷⁷ Whilst his intellect allowed him to 'see things that other men never dreamt of,' it also led him to 'deny what was under his nose.'⁷⁸ In a similar conclusion to that drawn by Lasswell, Hofstadter sees Calhoun's political failure as inevitable. Hofstadter sums up his analysis of Calhoun with the words, 'Here surely is a man who lived by abstractions; it is amazing and a little pathetic, that he sought to make his business the management of human affairs.'⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930; New York: Viking Press, 1960). Hofstadter would reference this work in a later article co-written with his wife, Beatrice, "Winston Churchill: A Study in the Popular Novel," *American Quarterly* 2, (Spring, 1950).

⁷⁵ Lasswell, *Psychopathology*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 91.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

The administrator was the most common of Lasswell's political types. In direct contrast to the theorist, he is characterized by a 'lack of interest in abstractions.'⁸⁰ The administrator's primary concern is not grand theory but, rather, a desire that their actions receive 'widespread affective responses from the public.'⁸¹ Those administrators who are most successful have the inherent ability to view all problems in the 'context of human relations.'⁸² Whilst Lasswell would make no judgment on the merits of the administrator in political life, Hofstadter made clear his distaste for those who sought to govern without due consideration to political principles.

Whilst some had greeted Roosevelt's policies as evidence of a newfound appreciation of the tribulations of the downtrodden American people by those in power, Hofstadter had remained sceptical. As Kazin explained, 'We were obsessed by Roosevelt, he was so much the wily slippery confidence man unable for very long to satisfy "people of principle."'⁸³ Roosevelt was an administrator, par excellence, a 'public instrument of the most delicate receptivity.'⁸⁴ As Hofstadter wrote, he had 'little regard for abstract principle,' but possessed a 'sharp intuitive knowledge of popular feeling.'⁸⁵ Much like Lasswell's administrator type, Roosevelt's success was built on his ability to 'affectively adjust' to the demands of the people and circumstances.⁸⁶

Whilst disparaging of Roosevelt's lack of philosophy Hofstadter felt obliged to point to his obvious successes. His 'experimental temper' had been the cornerstone of the policies that ensured American recovery in the wake of the Depression.⁸⁷ Most importantly, the New Deal had 'released the great forces of mass protest and had revived American liberalism.'⁸⁸ Nonetheless, Hofstadter warned that 'his belief in personal benevolence, personal arrangements, the sufficiency of good intentions and

⁸⁰ Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, 152.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Kazin, *New York Jew*, 15.

⁸⁴ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 317.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 316.

⁸⁶ Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, 152.

⁸⁷ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 317.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 340.

month-to month improvisation' was no substitute for an 'inclusive and systematic conception of what is happening in the world.'⁸⁹ The administrator type could succeed at certain times and for a period of time. However, American liberalism required something more if it were to successfully navigate the post-war world.

Hofstadter was deeply dissatisfied with the predominance of the administrator type in the nation's political past and present. A healthy political system needed a proportion of those whose thought was unbounded by the immediate practical concerns of law making and elections. His study of those men he believed had set the temper of the nation's political tradition showed that, too often, values were sacrificed for the sake of expedience. Wendell Phillips, 'an agitator by profession,' was the clamorous exception.⁹⁰ The chapter on Phillips, entitled 'The Patrician as Agitator', was the sole positive appraisal in *American Political Tradition*. Hofstadter sought to defend Phillips against those who had dismissed him as a 'wrongheaded radical', and nothing more than a convenient foil to Lincoln. Whilst Phillips may have been vulnerable to such characterization due to his disputatious rhetoric, his role was a vital one. As Hofstadter declared, 'the agitator is necessary to the republican commonwealth; he is the counterweight to sloth and indifference.'⁹¹

Phillips believed himself to be living in an age of ideas and he saw his role as one of communicating those ideas to the general public. Hofstadter wrote that he felt 'there was no higher office...than exercising the moral imagination necessary to mold the sentiments of the masses.'⁹² He saw his function not as one of making laws or of determining policy. Rather he sought 'to influence the public mind in the interest of some large social transformation.'⁹³ Understandably, his methods differed from those of the responsible politician. As Hofstadter asserted, he understood his role as an agitator to 'consist chiefly in talk.'⁹⁴ In this he excelled. Despite never holding office, he 'became

⁸⁹ Ibid., 352.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁹¹ Ibid., 138.

⁹² Ibid., 139.

⁹³ Ibid., 138.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

one of the most influential Americans during the few years after the fall of Fort Sumter.’⁹⁵ For a time, particularly in years of crisis, the agitator may find that the absolute values that they have held dear for many years suddenly become at one with the concerns of wider society.

Lasswell’s study went well beyond outlining the characteristics of the dominant political types. His detailed character studies were grounded in psychoanalytic theory. However, Hofstadter did not take his psychological analysis much beyond the initial categorizations. Nevertheless, there are inferences in his studies, that he was beginning to delve deeper in psychological theory at this time. This psychological approach is most apparent in Hofstadter’s treatment of Wilson. Wilson was ‘capable...of intense feelings of guilt [and] projected his demand for unmitigated righteousness into public affairs.’⁹⁶ He was seen as a perfect example of a politician who translated private needs and desires into his political ideology and conduct. Hofstadter wrote, ‘Wilson...had a powerful need for affection. A deep sense of isolation, a cramped capacity for personal communication, tortured and stunted his emotional life.’⁹⁷ His inability to communicate effectively in private and amongst those close to him was compensated by his ability to clearly articulate his political ideals. Likewise, he sought the expression of love that he so greatly desired in his personal life from the audiences who turned out to hear him speak. However, he would eventually come to resent the blurring of the boundaries between his private and public life. After the death of his first wife in 1914, he lamented the loss of his sense of self. Wilson wrote, ‘I never knew before that it was possible...for a man to lose his own personal existence.’⁹⁸ Inevitably, the projection of his personal needs and desires upon his political life failed to provide solace.

Hofstadter accepted that, ‘Politicians cannot be expected to have the traits of detached intellectuals.’⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the role of the intellectual in society is clearly of central importance to him and his analysis of that role, although a secondary theme, is key to

⁹⁵ Ibid., 140.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 238.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 267.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 194.

our understanding of the work. Hofstadter bemoaned the fact that Bryan had gained a place amongst the celebrated rebels in the history of American politics. In Hofstadter's opinion, Bryan lacked that critical component of the true rebel, 'a sense of alienation.'¹⁰⁰ Rebellion without the concomitant intellectual alienation was no rebellion at all. Bryan had never experienced 'the revolt of youth against paternal authority, of the village agnostic against the faith of his tribe, of the artist against the stereotypes of philistine life, of the socialist against the whole bourgeois community.'¹⁰¹ As a consequence, his rebellion was merely the espousal of another orthodoxy. Indeed, his orthodoxy only seemed rebellious due to its obsolescence.

Bryan was not the only political leader who was criticized for their failure to reach the standards, however impossible, of the engaged intellectual. Calhoun had remained too detached from the society of which he was part, leading him to become isolated and lost in abstraction. Wilson, despite his apparent aloofness, failed in his intellectual role due to 'his incapacity for detachment.'¹⁰² It was Phillips who was the solitary example of a political figure that embodied the key characteristics of the engaged intellectual. The chapter on Phillips opens with a quote from Phillips himself. He calls for 'college bred men...to tear a question open and riddle it with light and to educate the moral sense of the masses.'¹⁰³ Hofstadter's faith in the ability of intellectuals to influence the masses had been called into question during his brief period in the Communist Party. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Hofstadter retained a view of the intellectual's role as one of providing illumination for the society within which they lived. As Phillips outlined in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1881, the duty of the scholar 'is to help those less favored in life.'¹⁰⁴ The intellectual had a moral obligation to provide leadership and guidance.

Later commentators have perceived the book to have a personal significance beyond that of the simply professional. Much to Hofstadter's dismay, it came to be seen as

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰² Ibid., 241.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 162.

symbolic of a shift in Hofstadter's political and intellectual viewpoint, a work indicative of his move from radicalism to the centre ground. Yet initial reviewers seemed in no doubt that Hofstadter's call 'for a reinterpretation of our political traditions which emphasizes the common climate of American opinion' had a distinctly critical tone.¹⁰⁵ The book was viewed as an incisive critique of liberalism from an historian whose vantage point was firmly to the left. That 'none of the major parties...questioned the immovable cornerstone of capitalist America' was a matter of deep regret to Hofstadter.¹⁰⁶ Arthur Mann noted that Hofstadter's 'reinterpretation of our political traditions rests on his assertion that the major philosophies... are identical in their glorification of the capitalistic virtues that underlie our culture.'¹⁰⁷ Hofstadter's radical outlook and distaste for capitalism were evident throughout the work. Indeed, Mann went as far as to suggest that *The American Political Tradition* was an attempt by Hofstadter to urge his readers to 'adopt a new ideology of centralized planning.'¹⁰⁸

It is the introduction to the book that has been the focus of much attention in the years since the book's publication, a focus which has been the cause of many of the later misconceptions. Yet, as several of the reviewers noted, it did not seem to be completely integrated with the rest of the study. Aaron suggested that whilst 'it is difficult to quarrel with Mr Hofstadter's personal estimates of the men he is presenting...the implications of his thesis, advanced rather obliquely in his introduction, are not completely clear.'¹⁰⁹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. stated that both the title and introduction were at odds with the main body of the text. As a result, he considered it 'perfunctory' and felt that the 'rest of Mr Hofstadter's book...renders his introduction, not false, but somewhat irrelevant.'¹¹⁰ Mann concluded that the work failed as a synthesis, declaring that 'its chief value lies in its individual chapters.'¹¹¹ It is indeed an irony that the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., vii.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Aaron, "Review: *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*," *American Quarterly*, 1 (Spring, 1949), 95.

¹⁰⁷ Arthur Mann, "Review of *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It*," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 6 (April 1949), 301.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 302.

¹⁰⁹ Aaron, "Review: *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*," 96.

¹¹⁰ Schlesinger, Jr., "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," *The American Historical Review*, 54 (1 April 1949), 613.

¹¹¹ Mann, "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," 303.

element of the book that contemporary reviewers felt was not quite reflective of the work as a whole became the cornerstone of later interpretations.

The apparent incongruity of the book's title and introduction, and the main text, was clarified by Hofstadter in a lecture, entitled "The Winds of Historical Doctrine", which gave a fascinating insight into the author-publisher relationship. Hofstadter explained, 'when the book was in the editorial mill...the editors pointed out that the book badly needed a unifying introduction or conclusion.' Despite having no thought of developing a theory of American politics, the editors convinced him of the need to write an introduction that stressed 'the value of the book as a re-interpretation of the American past.' Indeed, it is clear from the correspondence with Knopf that they viewed the introductory statement as key to the commercial success of the book. The result of which, Hofstadter described, 'pushed me toward the kind of intellectual completeness that I had been resisting and toward a kind of intellectual daring that I had not contemplated.' The issue of the title proved equally contentious, as Hofstadter was persuaded to drop his 'original, and rather modest title...for the more pretentious, but also more saleable title under which the book went into the world.' As books of essays were considered commercially unviable, the title had to indicate a coherence and ambition that would arouse the interest of the reading public. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr had so perceptively discerned, both title and introduction were, to a great degree, 'tacked on at the last moment.'¹¹²

Despite Hofstadter's admission that 'I am not myself disposed to take too seriously the theoretical introduction', the opening remarks have come to be seen as the initial formulation of an important, but controversial, corrective to the dualism of his Progressive forebears.¹¹³ Hofstadter proclaimed that 'above and beyond temporary and local conflicts there has been a common ground, a unity of culture and political tradition, upon which American civilization has stood.'¹¹⁴ The assertion was that American political life was better viewed as a story of shared assumptions than of ideological

¹¹² Hofstadter, "The Winds of Historical Doctrine"; Schlesinger Jr., "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," 612

¹¹³ Hofstadter, "The Winds of Historical Doctrine."

¹¹⁴ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, x.

struggles. The Progressives had 'emphasised conflict to the degree that it made it impossible to go beyond them in this direction,' and Hofstadter's aim was to address the underlying premises that allowed America to exist as a nation.¹¹⁵ This emphasis placed by Hofstadter on ideological agreement rather than conflict led him to be associated with what John Higham labelled 'consensus history'.¹¹⁶

Interpretations of Hofstadter's work that place him within the 'consensus school' fail to grasp that he was intensely critical of the apparent lack of ideological struggle. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. maintained, 'he perceived the consensus from a radical perspective, from the outside, and deplored it.'¹¹⁷ The apparent consensus was a worrying discovery, rather than one that brought comfort. Therefore, the contention that Hofstadter, as a consensus historian, became a celebrant of his native land would appear far from the truth. In fact, Hofstadter saw his book as an antidote to American self-celebration and an attempt to show its political heroes not as marmoreal saints but as 'live and vulnerable figures of controversy.'¹¹⁸ The book's primary function was to unravel the myths that had surrounded the nation's leaders. In so doing, he hoped to produce a critical appraisal of the liberal faith, in the hope that it could be reconstructed. An engagement with the book beyond the opening comments would provide ample evidence that Hofstadter's concentration on consensus was intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Although some contemporary reviewers voiced concern at the disparity between the grand theoretical statement and the scope of the essays, only C. Vann Woodward foresaw the controversy that Hofstadter's emphasis on the 'unity of cultural and political tradition' might cause. Woodward wrote, 'It is little wonder that such assumptions prompt a certain uneasiness (as they did in the mind of the reviewer), for in other hands they have contributed to the literature of nationalism and complacency.' However, as

¹¹⁵ Hofstadter, "The Winds of Historical Doctrine."

¹¹⁶ John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, 27 (February 1959), 93–100.

¹¹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Richard Hofstadter," in *Past Masters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin Winks (New York: Harper Row, 1969), 289.

¹¹⁸ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, xxxi.

Woodward pointed out, 'Not so in the hands of Mr Hofstadter.'¹¹⁹ If only later critics had been as discerning as Woodward, impressions of Hofstadter and *The American Political Tradition* might be very different.

At the time of publication, not a single critic detected the roots of a nascent conservative historiographical movement within *The American Political Tradition*. However, they did find enough in both the introduction and subsequent character sketches to suggest that Hofstadter's work was reflective of something new in American history. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described the work as an 'altogether admirable product of the new political history,' setting the work alongside those of Ralph Gabriel and Joseph Dorfman. In a review that delighted Hofstadter, Perry Miller made a clear distinction between his work and that of Beard and the early pioneers in the field of intellectual history. Miller wrote that Hofstadter was a member of a younger group who 'write with a depth and with a fluency unknown to Beard and Curti because they understand what ideas mean...they have taken the life of ideas into their own consciousness.'¹²⁰ Although the book's influence has subsequently been reduced to its role in the passing of the Progressive model of history, it was assessed with a much greater degree of subtlety at the time of publication.

Hofstadter's intention had not been to announce the coming of a new historical model. His central concern was more political than historiographical. He had hoped that through his historical writing that he might awaken liberalism from its contented slumber. As he proclaimed in his introduction, 'the traditional ground is shifting under our feet. It is imperative at this time of cultural crisis to gain fresh perspectives on the past.'¹²¹ This intention was not lost on those who reviewed the book at the time of its publication. C. Vann Woodward concurred with Hofstadter when he voiced his concern that 'the old ground is shifting under our feet' and that a 'new perspective on the old tradition is needed.'¹²² Albert Huegli affirmed the need for a reconsideration of the

¹¹⁹ Woodward, "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," *Journal of American History*, 35 (1 March 1949), 681.

¹²⁰ Perry Miller, "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," *Nation*, (October 16, 1948), 440.

¹²¹ Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, x.

¹²² Woodward, "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," 682.

nation's political heritage in 'this perplexing hour of history.'¹²³ Arthur Mann agreed that 'a reinterpretation of the American political creed' was essential. Whilst faith in the capitalist ethos had been a coherent ideology in the nation's past, 'that same belief has become a mental illness for us moderns.'¹²⁴ The perception of the book as an attempt to commence the task of redefining and repositioning liberalism in light of the events of the first half of the twentieth century is one that has been lost. That this is so is a matter of great misfortune.

¹²³ Huegli, "Review of *The American Political Tradition*," 1214.

¹²⁴ Mann, "Review of *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It*," 302.

4

Chastened by Adversity – *The Age of Reform*

The publication of *The American Political Tradition* came just a few months before the 1948 presidential election. The crisis of liberalism and the shifting of the traditional political ground of which Hofstadter had written were never more evident than during the lead up to Truman's unexpected victory. In his review of the work Perry Miller had written, 'Hofstadter's thesis is an index of the times...and his book has vitality because he is vitally concerned.'¹ Hofstadter was not alone. American liberalism, still scarred by the events of World War II and now confronted by the growing threat of the Soviet Union, was faced with an uncertain future. This lack of certitude and the divisions within liberal ranks was reflected in the election campaign. As the *Columbia Daily Spectator* highlighted, 'In this election, "liberals" find themselves in all of the presidential camps' and 'the great need for a new political alignment has become obvious.'²

In reality, whilst the election brought the schisms within the liberalism into public view, the realignment, certainly amongst the New York intellectuals, had been under way for some time. A symposium of 1947 in the pages of *Partisan Review*, entitled "The Future of Socialism", reflected the growing sense of urgency and pessimism. The majority of the contributors, like Hofstadter, shared a sense of alienation both from the ideological commitments of their past and the mainstream of liberalism. However, whilst there was a degree of unanimity about what they wished to reject, there was little certainty about the way forward. The contributions were marked by a pervasive sense of despondency at the enormity of the task ahead, a sentiment reflected by George Orwell who warned, 'the actual outlook...is very dark, and any serious thought should start out from that fact.'³

¹ Perry Miller, "The New History", *The Nation* (October 16, 1948), 440.

² *Columbia Daily Spectator*, LXXI (21 October 1948), 5.

³ George Orwell, "The Future of Socialism: IV," *Partisan Review*, 14 (July-August 1947), 351.

The failure of liberal intellectuals was a recurring theme within the symposium. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. raged at the 'official liberal' who had failed to fulfil the role of providing intellectual leadership, instead 'devoting his ingenuity to laminating his favorite myths.' Despite the abundant evidence of Stalin's crimes, these intellectuals remained blind to the truth that 'ugly facts' underlay their 'fair morals.'⁴ Sidney Hook was equally critical of those he described as 'totalitarian liberal politicians,' whose 'ignorance is as broad as their dogmatism is deep.' Whilst their numbers were relatively small, they had 'so poisoned the climate of opinion,' that the American public found it difficult to determine whether the left was a friend of the nation, or a foe. Liberalism needed to be purged of those 'incurable muddleheads' who had made themselves unconscious defenders of totalitarianism and it was the role of intellectuals to plot the route out of the abyss. First, there must be an abandonment of the liberal faith in human perfectibility. Whilst this had served them well in a century of peace and prosperity, it was now clearly misplaced.⁵ Furthermore, as Granville Hicks warned, 'we better get rid of any remnant of belief in progress.' It was the unwavering faith in these central tenets that had allowed liberal intellectuals to be captivated by the revolutionary promise.⁶

For those who contributed to the symposium, Stalinism had long been the central cultural and political issue faced by the nation and, as the 1948 election drew near, those battles that they had been fighting for over a decade became ones of wider national importance. Henry Wallace's decision to oppose Truman and to stand as a presidential candidate on a Progressive Party ticket brought the issue to the forefront of the election debate. The split between those liberal intellectuals who enthusiastically supported Wallace and those who vehemently opposed him provides significant insight into the battle over the future of liberalism.

Wallace, a former vice-president under Roosevelt, and committed New Dealer, had been a respected figure on the left of the Democratic Party due to his outspoken calls for

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Future of Socialism: III," *Partisan Review*, 14 (May-June, 1947), 229-242.

⁵ Sidney Hook, "The Future of Socialism," *Partisan Review*, 14 (Jan-Feb, 1947), 33, 35.

⁶ Granville Hicks, "The Future of Socialism: II," *Partisan Review*, 14 (March-April, 1947), 123.

reform at home and cooperation abroad. In battling against the tide of conservatism within his party, he became what Alonzo Hamby has described as a 'living symbol of the fortunes of the liberal movement.'⁷ For those who had sympathized with his reformist sensibilities, his dismissal from the role of Secretary of Commerce by Harry Truman signalled an end to the era of the New Deal. However, his removal from office did not precipitate a withdrawal from politics, and he quickly found a channel through which he could make public his dissent. Barely a month after leaving office, he was announced as chief editor of the *New Republic*.

The *New Republic* quickly became the voice of those liberals who had become disillusioned with Truman's domestic and foreign policies.⁸ For those who hoped for a continuation of the New Deal, in the form of continued social reform and diplomatic cooperation, the apparent rightward shift under Truman left them without a political home. The Progressive Citizens for America (PCA), an organization co-founded by Wallace brought these dissident liberals together. Whilst his editorial post offered him the opportunity to denounce Truman's policies in print, his speaking tour, under the auspices of the PCA, ensured his message travelled far beyond the pages of the *New Republic*. His stated goals of 'peace, prosperity, and freedom in one world,' chimed with the concerns of many disaffected liberals and their support convinced him that there was demand for a third party that reflected the 'growing liberal sentiment of...Americans.'⁹ He relinquished his editorship of the *New Republic* and announced his intention to stand for the presidency in January 1948.

Whilst Wallace had been closely in step with the core of liberal-left opinion during his time in office, the events of the period meant that the political ground had shifted rapidly. The spectre of the Soviet Union began to take centre stage, and the news of Stalin's repression in Eastern Europe, the coup in Czechoslovakia, and the Berlin Blockade all added to the growing sense of the real danger posed by communism.

⁷ Alonzo L. Hamby, "Henry A. Wallace, the Liberals, and Soviet-American Relations," *The Review of Politics*, 30 (April 1968), 154.

⁸ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

Wallace's idealistic image of the Soviet Union and belief that reactionary forces within the United States were the main barriers to peace set him at odds with the anti-Stalinist intellectuals. As veterans of the battle against Stalinism, they were uncompromising in their criticism. Wallace was charged with 'combining all the wretched delusions of liberalism in his own person.'¹⁰ His apparent acceptance of Moscow's thesis of 'capitalist encirclement' and suggestion that the country should give up its atomic arsenal and work towards agreement with the Soviet Union were seen to be indicative of a mind that was not only naïve, but dangerous. Rahv's assessment of Wallace was damning: 'the most useful quisling that Stalin has so far found in this country.'¹¹

Wallace had built his support on the basis of a liberal-communist alliance in the mould of the Popular Front. However, as the election drew nearer increasing numbers of liberals left his camp. His appeal had been somewhat weakened when the Democrats, who viewed his campaign as a real threat, had stolen much of his fire when they anticipated a considerable number of his domestic policies during their convention. Crucially, the Democrats now offered liberals a significant reform program at home alongside a foreign policy that promised to stand firm against the Soviet Union. By the time of the election, the two competing visions of liberalism had become increasingly polarized and it had become clear that the differences were irreconcilable. Wallace's former colleagues at the *New Republic* came out for Truman and reprimanded him for threatening the unity of liberalism. As Wallace's liberal base of support subsided, he became increasingly indebted to his communist supporters, which served only to give further evidence to his critics that he was simply a front for the Communist Party. This sentiment was summed up by James Burnham in his review of Wallace's book, *Toward World Peace*, when he wrote, 'Politics is simple, and it is coarse. Only one vulgar slogan is required to sum up the truth: "A vote for Wallace is a vote for Stalin."' "¹²

Despite the intensity of the battle amongst liberals in the lead up to the election, there were few who felt it likely to influence who would be President after the election. As

¹⁰ Philip Rahv, "Disillusionment and Partial Answers," *Partisan Review* (May, 1948), 528.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² James Burnham "The Wallace Crusade: Review of Henry Wallace's *Toward World Peace*," *Partisan Review* (June, 1948), 704.

they entered the polls, a Republican victory seemed certain. Indeed, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* was so confident of the result that they ran the headline, 'Dewey Defeats Truman,' on the evening of the election. The following day, the returns confounded everyone, as Truman carried twenty-eight states, and almost fifty per cent of the popular vote. Wallace's support, by contrast, had been reduced to little more than a million votes. The victory won Truman a degree of renewed respect and provided a glimmer of hope for those who had feared a liberal split. As Alfred Kazin noted in his diary, the election result had provoked 'a sudden feeling of pride in being an American and in realizing that the liberal core of the country is so solid.' Nevertheless, he personally considered Truman to be 'mediocrity incarnate' and had not been able to bring himself to vote for him. Instead, he had voted for Norman Thomas, the Socialist candidate.¹³ As had Fritz Stern, a colleague and friend of Hofstadter's who remembered a conversation in which Hofstadter confided that he too would vote for Thomas.¹⁴ For some, particularly those within New York intellectual circles, Truman's victory, whilst altogether welcome, did little to address the deeper issues that beset liberalism.

The electoral success of the Democratic Party did not temper the debate amongst intellectuals over the future of liberalism and Hofstadter's work would come to be seen as central to this dialogue. The twin concerns that had inspired the *American Political Tradition*, the need to reassess both the liberal tradition and Progressive historiography continued to occupy Hofstadter's mind in the following years. It was evident to Hofstadter that the two were inextricably linked as the Progressive model was firmly rooted in the reform tradition that had been central to liberalism in the early years of the century. Whilst his long-term project would further develop his analysis of the liberal tradition, he first returned to the work of his Progressive forebears. In the Fall of 1949, Hofstadter published "Turner and the Frontier Myth" in the *American Scholar*. The essay, a study of a theory that Hofstadter felt 'embodied the predominant view of the American past,' was primarily a synthesis of existing criticisms of Turner's thesis. There was an acceptance that the frontier theory had a certain degree of plausibility

¹³ Richard Cook (ed.), *Alfred Kazin's Journals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 122.

¹⁴ Cited in Robin Vandome, "Richard Hofstadter: A Historian and his Times," unpublished Masters thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004, 46.

given the undoubted impact of a century of continental expansion. However, it was deemed as 'one of several valid, but limited, perspectives on American history.' The focus on one governing factor in the nation's development, to the exclusion of all else, made for a particularly 'blunt instrument.'¹⁵

As Hofstadter outlined, the frontier thesis was undeniably a product of both its time and place. Turner had drawn up his hypothesis during the Bryan campaign of 1896, and it was both 'an expression of rising Western self-consciousness' and a 'challenge to the dominant academic school of Eastern historians.' Whilst it was an important corrective to the racially determined 'germ theory' of his mentor Herbert Baxter Adams, Turner's thesis proved equally reductive. Racial heredity was replaced by the theory of environment, a theory equally rooted in Darwinian thought. Yet, Hofstadter was careful to note that despite the fact that Turner 'stated his ideas with the vigor of a propagandist, his was not a doctrinaire mind.' It was unfortunate, according to Hofstadter, that his students accepted his thesis as dogma, rather than as a stimulus to further inquiry. What may have had some function as a working hypothesis ultimately became nothing more than a repetitious 'incantation.' The unwavering acceptance of the thesis as a comprehensive interpretative model of the American past was all the more perplexing to Hofstadter in light of the modern political experience.¹⁶

From Hofstadter's perspective, Turner's rootedness in the agrarianism of the Populist era and his acceptance of the myth of the virtue of rural America seemed out of step with modern urban America. Yet, the idea of the frontier continued to retain a hold within public culture, and to a lesser degree within the academy. That this was so was the cause of both regret and bemusement to Hofstadter. His assessment of Turner's contribution is best summed up in a letter to Merle Curti written the previous year in which he suggested that the 'frontier thesis...seems to me to have a pound of falsehood for every few ounces of truth in it.'¹⁷ The fact that it had retained its mythic status despite its diminishing validity was particularly significant to Hofstadter. He had

¹⁵ Hofstadter, "Turner and the Frontier Myth," *The American Scholar*, 18 (Autumn, 1949), 433, 437.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 433, 435.

¹⁷ Hofstadter to Merle Curti, undated (1948), Merle Curti Papers.

touched upon the persistence of central myths within wider liberal thought in his previous work, and it would again become central to the *Age of Reform*.

Hofstadter's critique of the frontier thesis was followed, a year later, by an appraisal of the other dominant historical model established by the Progressive generation, Beard's economic interpretation of politics. He had explained to Curti that 'Beard was a tremendous influence on me' and that ...I owe so much to him that I wish he cd know about it...above all he made history interesting to us all.' Yet he also admitted that what he had written to date had been, on the whole, critical.¹⁸ Nevertheless, his 1950 essay "Beard and the Constitution: The History of an Idea", published in *American Quarterly*, continued in a critical vein. The focus of the essay was Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, a book that once had shocked but had with time 'entered calmly into history.'¹⁹ Hofstadter set out not to evaluate the work, but rather to place it in its historical context, to draw attention to what he saw as an inherent ambiguity within the work, and to suggest that Beard's changing attitude was symptomatic of a wider movement in American intellectual history in the previous three decades.

As had been the case with Turner's theory of the frontier, both the Populist movement and the sense of the distinctiveness of the West shaped Beard's work. The muckraking spirit of the Progressive era, itself an extension of the Populist antipathy towards societal change added another dimension and impetus to his ideas. However, it was his engagement with the developments in the social sciences that had the most profound influence and led him to produce work that was both innovative and controversial. His determination, like that of several of his colleagues at Columbia, to break down the barriers between disciplines and to break free of the formalistic approach of his predecessors, opened up exciting new vistas. Hofstadter placed Beard's intention to bring empirical study to bear on the Constitution as part of a movement within liberalism to formulate a theory of state that moved beyond abstract concepts. With the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hofstadter, "Beard and the Constitution: The History of an Idea," *American Quarterly*, 2 (Autumn 1950), 195.

‘insights of current critical thought’ at his disposal, Beard brought his ‘bold and free mind’ to bear on the interests that had been at play during the drafting of the Constitution.²⁰

Beard’s research on the background of the framers was exhaustive and covered the personal to the political, and social to economic. Yet of all the factors addressed it was his chapter on their economic status that generated the most heated response. However, as Hofstadter pointed out, the relationship between the framers and their own economic interests was an ambiguous one in Beard’s chapter. Whilst it could be read that the framers were motivated to further their own financial advantage, there were passages in the text that seemed clearly to state otherwise, and were carefully worded to suggest a more indirect influence. Hofstadter concluded that it was clear Beard felt the framers’ decisions were governed by personal experience, and were not wholly disinterested. Yet there was a degree of ‘incidental overstatement’ that suggested personal interest was a guiding factor in their decisions.²¹

Hofstadter was attuned to the temptation for the revisionist to overstate a thesis and he would admit to being guilty himself in later years. However, he discerned ‘a real ambiguity’ underlying Beard’s thesis and, behind this, ‘a certain dualism’ in his thought. The reason for the dualism was the binary nature of Beard’s role as an intellectual. He was not simply a scholar, but also a ‘publicist with an urgent interest in the intellectual and public milieu in which he lived.’²² His active engagement in the politics of his day, and his desire to act as a social critic had an ineludible impact on his scholarship. The Populist-Progressive tradition of which he was a part inevitably influenced his thinking and ‘the limitations, as well as the best insights of that style of thought, left their impress upon his book.’ In an era dominated by the journalistic demand for the uncovering of the hidden reality, Beard’s study was imbued with the spirit of the muckrakers.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 203.

²¹ Ibid., 206.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 207.

The economic interpretation of history found new momentum during the Great Depression and the New Deal era as the class struggle returned to the political stage. Beard himself, in a new introduction written for a 1935 republication, felt that his thesis had stood the test of time. Yet as Hofstadter suggested, the world was already changing, and liberal intellectuals, including Beard, began to revise their opinions of their own nation.²⁴ The rise of Nazism and the Stalinist repression led Beard to move his focus to the importance of the preservation of democratic government. As Hofstadter described, 'his original view...had taken shape in an age of domestic conflict, his final view was fashioned in an age of world conflict.'²⁵ A focus on class interests was replaced by one that considered the value of a political system that prevented the concentration of power in the hands of the military. That the Founders had succeeded in instituting a Constitutional government rather than a military dictatorship was seen 'as their greatest triumph.' Whilst the Constitution may have been a victory of conservative republicanism over radical democracy, it was also a victory over militarism. This, as Hofstadter points out, was 'a pertinent theme in 1943'.²⁶ It was no less pertinent a theme as Hofstadter and others considered the future of liberalism in the post-war world.²⁷

Hofstadter's criticism of the Progressive historians was bound to set him at odds with his mentor, Curti. In a conversation with Lee Benson, Curti had spoken disparagingly of the 'currently fashionable anti-Beard bandwagon.'²⁸ Hofstadter, no doubt mindful of Curti's sensitivity, was careful to defend his critical judgments as being primarily concerned with relevance. The Progressive era was no longer, and consequently the work of Beard and Turner had ceased to function as convincing guides to the American past. However, it is evident from the essays themselves that his criticism went beyond that of their being merely outdated. In considering the role of intellectuals, Hofstadter saw a need to produce work that was more than simply a reflection of the milieu in which it was written. Rather, their primary role must be to prompt critical self-

²⁴ Ibid., 210.

²⁵ Ibid., 211.

²⁶ Ibid., 212.

²⁷ Ibid., 209-212.

²⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 347.

reflection, both at an individual and societal level. It is perhaps in this that we see most clearly Hofstadter's sense of disagreement with the earlier generation. He could agree with the sentiment attributed to Turner that 'the historian had too largely held himself aloof from current struggles.'²⁹ However, the idea that they should, through their work, give implied support to political issues was a more complicated one. Whilst the need to produce history that was relevant was something that would be central throughout his career, he was still formulating his sense of the connection between the work of history and political life. Although there was an inevitable interconnectedness, he was mindful that the intellectual, as Karl Mannheim had set out, must manage the careful balance between involvement and detachment.

It is undoubted that Hofstadter, in calling into question the central tenets of mid-Western historiography, was rejecting their vision of liberalism. As he had outlined in his essays, the political ideologies that had continued to inform their historical work were incapable of addressing the issues of the present time. Nonetheless, he continued to see himself as a critic from within the liberal tradition. It was less their political concerns, many of which he shared, with which he took issue, but rather their proposed solutions. Indeed, like many within his intellectual circle, he had little faith that there was a clear path forward. In an article for *American Perspective*, he outlined his hope that 'the liberal intelligence of our time' might 'find a way out of the twentieth century crisis.'³⁰ In his sense of the immensity of the task faced and his belief that it was incumbent upon the intellectuals to revitalize liberalism, he shared the sentiments of many of the New York intellectuals.

Whilst Hofstadter's works in the period have come to be considered products of the 'consensus' school of history, his writing was rooted in concern rather than celebration. In this respect, it is more illuminating to consider his work not as indicative of a growing conservative strain in American historiography, but rather as a reflection of a new liberalism. In his work, he joined others who had been alienated from the liberal

²⁹ Merle Curti, "The Democratic Theme in American Historical Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 39 (June 1952), 13.

³⁰ Hofstadter, "American Power: The Domestic Sources," *American Perspective*, IV (Winter 1950), 36.

mainstream but now sought to re-fashion it in order that it might not only survive, but also prosper. Their primary aim was to rid liberalism of the simplifications of the past and revive an appreciation of the complexity of life, a complexity that was all too clear in the aftermath of World War II and in an era in which the world was becoming increasingly polarized.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was at the forefront of the new liberalism. *The Vital Center*, published in 1949, was according to Jonathan Daniels 'one of those books which may suddenly and clearly announce the spirit of an age to itself.'³¹ Whilst Schlesinger had been less involved in radical politics than the majority of the New York intellectuals, he shared the concerns regarding Stalinism and what he saw as the corruption of liberalism. Schlesinger's study would be a central statement in the defence of liberalism against the extremism of the left and the right. His thesis was that mid-century liberalism had been 'fundamentally shaped by the hope of the New Deal, by the exposure of the Soviet Union, and by the deepening of our knowledge of man.'³² Like his peers, Schlesinger had absorbed the writings of the liberal Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's revival of the idea of man's essentially sinful nature brought a harder edge to the liberal discourse. As had been discussed in the 1947 *Partisan Review* symposium, liberalism had been guilty of 'a sentimental belief in progress.'³³ The events in Europe had shattered the idealism of the intellectuals and the optimism that had been central to liberal thinking since the Enlightenment was dismissed as naïve. The experience in the Soviet Union had taught liberalism a vital lesson. Schlesinger wrote, 'It broke the bubble of false optimism... [and] reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect.'³⁴

With liberalism shorn of its naivety, Schlesinger proposed a new vision. He declared the solution to be a 'new radicalism, drawing strength from a realistic conception of man,

³¹ Jonathan Daniels, "Ready to Be Radical," *Saturday Review of Literature*, Sept. 10, 1949, 11.

³² Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949; New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), xix.

³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

dedicat[ing] itself to problems as they come.’³⁵ Schlesinger urged liberals to build upon the successes of the New Deal, and put their faith in Keynesian economic theory. As Schlesinger put it, ‘Keynes, not Marx, is the prophet of the new radicalism.’³⁶ Backed by John Kenneth Galbraith’s theory of ‘countervailing powers’ and self-regulation, those like Schlesinger had begun to see the mixed economy as central to the modern pluralist state. This pluralism was based not on ideology but on the practicalities of modern society. As Schlesinger described, the intellectuals had become advocates of ‘social progress rather than of intellectual doctrine, committed to ends rather than means.’³⁷

Whilst Schlesinger was somewhat on the fringes of the New York Intellectual circle, Lionel Trilling was one of its original members. *The Liberal Imagination*, published in 1950, was his attempt to disassociate liberalism from what he perceived to be the naïve radicalism of the 1930s. The book, a collection of essays written in the decade before publication, is haunted by the spectre of Stalinism. As Trilling himself later noted, ‘All my essays of the Forties were written from my sense of this... dull, repressive tendency of opinion which was coming to dominate the old ethos of liberal enlightenment.’³⁸ Liberalism’s failure in the 1930s had been its failure to guard against these tendencies. Those on the left had been guilty of sacrificing their critical function that had led to an unquestioning acceptance of the monolithic, reductive and ideological thinking of communism.

Trilling admonished liberalism for its ‘tendencies...to simplify.’³⁹ Influenced, like Schlesinger, by Niebuhr, Trilling saw in liberalism a failure to come to terms with the imperfect nature of man. This optimistic image of man led them to blind acceptance of the belief in inevitable progress. The constant striving for this perfect future meant that liberalism failed to appreciate the lessons of the past and the realities of the present. The role of the intellectual, therefore, was one of ‘recall[ing] liberalism to its first

³⁵ Ibid., 256.

³⁶ Ibid., 183.

³⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 88.

³⁸ Lionel Trilling, *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 141.

³⁹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), 9.

imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty.’⁴⁰ Hofstadter, like Trilling, was less overtly political than Schlesinger, and was certainly less willing to proclaim the virtues of the Keynesian system and the pluralist state. The new liberalism, like the old, was a broad church. Nevertheless, the realistic reformulation of the liberal tradition of Trilling and Schlesinger mirrored many of Hofstadter’s concerns in his historical study. With *The American Political Tradition*, he had issued a call for the re-evaluation of liberalism and he was determined to play his own part in that conversation.

In the years following *The American Political Tradition* Hofstadter immersed himself in wide ranging inter-disciplinary reading. The intellectual environment of Columbia proved vital in developing his appreciation of the social sciences. The university had established itself as the centre of new developments in social scientific thought, emphasizing the psychological factors behind social behaviour. Hofstadter, convinced of the power of these new methods to shine a light on the past, was not content to remain a passive observer in the debates. As he wrote in ‘History and the Social Sciences,’ familiarity with the social sciences offered the historian ‘a host of new insights and new creative possibilities.’⁴¹

The influence of Max Weber, and more so his interpreters, is easy to divine in Hofstadter’s work. Weber’s writings were central to the work of the sociology department at Columbia. According to Daniel Bell, ‘Weber had become rather important at the time for us...it was basically Weber’s influence on status politics which Marty Lipset [and] I took up and Dick [Hofstadter] very quickly took the lead.’⁴² Weber asserted that the Marxist concentration on material factors had resulted in a narrow theoretical model, incapable of explaining the complex relations between social groups. Whilst accepting that economic factors played an important role, Weber was keen to analyse the psychological factors behind both individual and group action. At the forefront of the study of Weber at Columbia was Robert K. Merton, who would use

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹ Richard Hofstadter, “History and the Social Sciences,” in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (London: Macmillan, 1956), 361.

⁴² Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 91.

Weber's writing on subjective and objective logic to develop his theory of 'manifest' and 'latent' functions. Merton showed that actions that may appear irrational to the detached observer could be analysed in rational terms.

In 'History and the Social Sciences' Hofstadter explained, 'Mannheim provided the link between ideas and social situations.'⁴³ Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, described both ideology and utopia as 'reality transcendent', distinguishing them from the 'concretely existing', actual reality.⁴⁴ The distinction between these two transcending impulses was temporal. Ideology reflected a reality passed whilst utopia reflected a future reality.⁴⁵ However, Mannheim stated that all social groups constructed both utopias and ideologies. The social stratum that was in decline was more prone to construct wild utopias as its ideology was being eroded. For Hofstadter, Mannheim provided an insight into the relationship between social position and the myths, whether they are ideological or utopian, that social groups formulate. Immediate interests were just one part of a much wider picture. If the historian could uncover the hidden desires of social groups, rather than what would appear to be their rational concerns, it would allow him to better understand their apparently irrational actions.

Hofstadter's first major attempt to incorporate the interpretative richness of social scientific theory was a lecture at Bennington College in 1951, later published as 'Cuba, the Philippines, and Manifest Destiny' in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter showed that the imperialist drive of the late 1890s could not be viewed satisfactorily as a product of economic interests. As Hofstadter put it, 'simple rationalistic explanations of national behaviour will...leave us dissatisfied.' He insisted on the need to enter 'the high and dangerous ground of social psychology and...the arena of conjecture.'⁴⁶ Economic concerns could not explain why those businessmen who would eventually profit from imperial gains had been opponents and those with little to gain had been the most vociferous supporters. Hofstadter's explanation pointed

⁴³ Hofstadter, "History and the Social Sciences," 361.

⁴⁴ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1998), 175.

⁴⁵ Vincent Geoghegan, "Ideology and Utopia," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2004), 124.

⁴⁶ Richard Hofstadter, "Cuba, Philippines, and Manifest Destiny," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 185.

to a 'psychic crisis of the 1890s,' brought about in the aftermath of the depression by the political uncertainty generated by the rise of the Populist movement, the growing strength of the trusts in American business life, and the disappearance of the frontier.⁴⁷ The fears and anxieties of the various social groups were translated into an aggressive 'national self-assertion.'⁴⁸ An expansionist foreign policy that was clothed in the terminology of duty and destiny served to allay the concerns of those disparate groups impacted by the this crisis.

In January 1952, Hofstadter was invited to the University of Chicago to deliver the Walgreen Lectures. Already committed to completing a work on the thought and culture of the period 1890-1940, he chose the subject of the reform tradition, giving six lectures entitled, 'From Populism to Progressivism.'⁴⁹ As he had been requested to present the lectures in written form, it followed logically that the material might be easily converted into book format.⁵⁰ Hofstadter subsequently sent a copy of the six lectures to Alfred Knopf to determine whether there would be interest in its publication. His letter explained that the book would be in 'no sense a narrative history...nor is it biographical...It is an analytical history which attempts to explain the reform political movements of the period 1890-1914 in terms of social forces, with strong emphasis on broad popular ideas.' Hofstadter hoped to add, what he felt would be 'an amusing and valuable' examination of the Socialist Party during the Progressive era, as well as bringing the study up to date with a comparison between the New Deal and the earlier reform movements. It was this final chapter that he felt might ensure the book would appeal to the 'trade public'.⁵¹

Knopf was more than happy to continue their relationship with Hofstadter, particularly given the prospect of the work being otherwise published by the University of Chicago Press. The book, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, was published in the summer

⁴⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁹ Lecture Program, Knopf Papers, Box 170.

⁵⁰ Hofstadter to William Miller, undated, likely 1952, RHP, Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁵¹ Hofstadter to Alfred Knopf, February 19, 1952, Box 170, Knopf Papers.

of 1955.⁵² As had been the case with *The American Political Tradition*, the introduction was the subject of significant dispute. Both Strauss and Knopf felt strongly that the focus of the introduction was too methodological. He wrote Hofstadter in December 1954 that 'you write too narrowly from your own point of view, without considering what the reader wants to learn or does not want to learn.' From the publisher's perspective, the central point, like it had been in his previous book was that the work was a new analysis rather than a version of the familiar tale. That 'was the real bait.' Hofstadter's responded obdurately and suggested that the enthusiastic reception he had received from a significant number of his colleagues was representative of the likely response of readers. When he sent the final draft a month later, he admitted to Knopf that he had altered little of the introduction, and added that his personal opinion was that it was 'very good indeed.' He concluded the letter with a clear statement that he was unwilling to budge on the subject, as he wrote, 'I guess this is one of those irreducible differences of opinion.'⁵³

The disagreement regarding the introduction and Hofstadter's intransigence over the matter is evidence not just of his growing confidence in his work or of his greater sense of financial security. More importantly, it reflects his feelings regarding the function of his study. In a letter to William Miller to whom he had sent an early draft, he pointed out that, 'You will see immediately from the tone of the thing that I have not tried to be popular.' He continued by adding, 'I don't want to make any concessions ...to jazz it up or vulgarize it.' His ambition for the book was not to make money, but rather to produce a work that would be 'respected by people whose judgement I respect.' It is evident that his perceived audience was not necessarily that which the publishers wished to reach. The final chapter, which he sold to Knopf as one that might attract a wider audience, was described as 'a concession of sorts' and not his real interest or purpose. His primary aim, as his introduction would attest to, was to prompt a reconsideration of the reform movements and to shine a fresh light on the liberal tradition. It was not intended to be a

⁵² The question of title was less contentious than it had been with *American Political Tradition*. Hofstadter asked only that it not be 'anything too fancy, like *Rendez-Vous with Destiny*,' a reference to the recent work published by Eric Goldman.

⁵³ Harold Strauss to Hofstadter, December 14, 1954; Hofstadter to Strauss, December 16, 1954; Hofstadter to Knopf January 10, 1955, Knopf Papers, Box 170.

work of popular history, but rather a counter-progressive statement that he hoped would spur further study and methodological invention. Interestingly, in his letter to Miller he noted a desire to be politically relevant but felt that 'the political relevance of this work is pretty thin and tenuous.' However, by the time he had re-drafted his lectures into chapters and written his introduction it was evident that he was more certain of their political import. What had commenced as an intervention in the historiographical debates of the period now also formed part of the political dialogue.⁵⁴

In his introduction, Hofstadter made explicit his intention to produce 'a new analysis from the perspective of our own time.' He informed his readers that he had not been inspired 'by a desire to retell the familiar story' but rather by a concern that the conventional explanations were too much coloured by the authors' own sense of kinship with the reformers. Previous studies of the period had viewed the New Deal as 'an analogue and a lineal descendent of the Populist-Progressive tradition.' Consequently, the authors writing during and shortly after the New Deal era of reform were not simply sympathetic but their thought was pervaded by many of the same assumptions. This intellectual propinquity gave rise to a tendency to minimise the distinctiveness of the individual movements and 'to distort the character of our history.' A fresh vantage point, a decade after the New Deal, allowed sufficient intellectual distance from which to critically reassess the reform tradition in the period. Nonetheless, despite his detachment, Hofstadter was keen to explain that he viewed himself as 'criticizing largely from within,' As he noted, the 'tradition of Progressive reform is the one upon which I was reared and upon which my political sentiments were formed.' Whilst he admitted to being more critical than he might have been earlier in his career, it was not intended to be a hostile account.⁵⁵

Hofstadter perceived his study to be one of reflection on his own intellectual and political heritage, not as a disavowal, but rather as a necessary part of what he felt was the liberal intellectual's role in revitalising that tradition. Whilst the nation had been, on the whole, politically conservative, there was not a strong conservative intellectual

⁵⁴ Hofstadter to William Miller, undated (1952), RHP, Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁵⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform : From Bryan to F.D.R* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 3, 4, 12.

tradition. In the absence of this counterweight, liberal intellectuals were forced to complete the work of criticism themselves. In a reference to Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, Hofstadter wrote of the need for liberalism to be self-critical, to investigate its past in order that it might rid itself of the myths and irrational side of its character. His aim in studying the Populist-Progressive tradition was 'to reveal some of the limitations of that tradition and to help free it of its sentimentalities and complacencies.'⁵⁶

In an acknowledgement of the criticism of those who suggested his desire to revise the Progressive model was derived from neo-conservative sentiment, he dismissed any ideological commitment to conservatism. However, he did concede that if there was anything of merit within neo-conservatism, it was 'simply the old liberalism, chastened by adversity, tempered by time and modulated by a growing sense of reality.'⁵⁷ The events of recent years had forced liberalism to reconsider its origins, to dispense with its sentimental attachment to progress and to face the world head on. Hofstadter, like Schlesinger, was critical of liberal intellectuals for their failure to recognize in communism the same traits that it had been so quick to condemn in fascism. The moral relativism of the 'totalitarian liberals' had been a gross failing on the part of the intellectuals. Yet, unlike Eric Goldman, Hofstadter did not view this relativism as reflective of the tradition. Rather, moral absolutism was the danger.⁵⁸ The reform tradition had played an essential role in bearing witness to the inequities within the political system, and in campaigning for change. However, in its demands it had too often wandered 'over the border between reality and impossibility.'⁵⁹ The unwillingness to compromise was indicative of liberalism's insufficient 'sense of the limits that the human condition will in the end insistently impose upon us.'⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

Hofstadter made clear that whilst his work is a study of political thought, it was concerned 'not with the best but with the most characteristic thinking.'⁶¹ Importantly, he wrote of the distance that the writers of the 'most important speculative writing' of the period kept from active politics.⁶² Whilst sympathetic, this intellectual detachment allowed them to fulfil their role as critics not only of the institutions at which the reformers directed their anger, but also of the reform movements themselves. This was in contrast to those intellectuals who uncritically accepted the demands and judgements of the people as being, of necessity, always right. In a clear reference to the intellectual temper of the 1930s he criticised the 'tendency to sentimentalize the folk,' and to 'remake the image of popular rebellion closer to their own heart's desire.'⁶³ That the political sentiment of the people, at certain times in the nation's past, coincided with liberal beliefs and programs led to an exaggeration of the agreement. The combination of a yearning to break free of their position of alienation, and a misplaced belief that 'history will move...in a straight line' towards the accomplishment of an ideal society, had led some intellectuals to lose sight of the 'very complexity of the historical process itself.'⁶⁴ Of this, Hofstadter later admitted, 'I was very far from free.' However, the complexity had been rediscovered in the years that followed World War II and a critical distance re-established. As a result, Hofstadter later explained that 'they were less impressed with the natural wisdom of the populace than they had been.'⁶⁵

The reassessment of the liberal tradition was not wholly a result of disillusionment. In a lecture delivered in the early 1960s Hofstadter spoke of the growing sense amongst intellectuals that 'the things we had believed in and hoped for in 1933, and after, were now already institutionalized.' Whilst, in the wake of the Great Depression the intellectuals had joined forces with the 'angry and disinherited poor' in demanding societal change, 'they now had the satisfaction of seeing the changes made.'⁶⁶ Indeed, as he was writing *The Age of Reform*, the discontented were now the ultra-conservative

⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶² Ibid., 7.

⁶³ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hofstadter, "The Winds of Historical Doctrine."

⁶⁶ Hofstadter, "Reconsidering *The Age of Reform*," KLRU-TEMP Video Collection.

supporters of McCarthy, those who sought to dismantle much that had been achieved by the reforms of the New Deal. Therefore, the book was written from a vantage point that was both politically satisfied and intellectually embattled. As he declared in the introduction, 'we can better serve ourselves...by holding to what we have gained and learned, while trying to find some way out of the impasse of our polarized world.'⁶⁷ *The Age of Reform* was much more than a historical study; it was an intellectual statement for its time. Indeed, the introduction to the book reads like a distillation of all the major issues that had exercised the minds of the New York Intellectuals, in the 1950s.

Hofstadter commenced his study with a critique of the Populists and his readings in social psychology led him to search for the incongruities in their thought. Whilst he was mindful to acknowledge their concrete political programs, it was the ambiguous nature of the movement that was his focus. As he had noted in his introduction, he was concerned less with the political campaigns and the legislative successes and more with the reformer's ideas, in particular their conception of themselves. It was the disparity between the conception and the actuality that he felt had been too much ignored. By using the insights gained from his studies in sociological theory Hofstadter attempted to separate out the 'hard' and 'soft' sides of the Populist movement, those of practical business policy and pressure politics as opposed to the romantic agrarian ideology. It was, Hofstadter contended, the 'soft' side that had dominated both Populist rhetoric and 'the modern liberal's indulgent view of the farmer's revolt.'⁶⁸ In contrast, Hofstadter placed the revolts against the backdrop of an international agrarian crisis and the particularly acute drop in wheat, cotton and silver prices. Despite later criticisms of the book for his analysis of the 'soft' side of Populism, it is important to remember that much of his explanation was economic.

In many ways, the economic interpretation that he had been at pains to outline was overshadowed by his concentration on Populism's 'unseen blemishes'. Although the idealistic solutions that were based on the agrarian myth were gradually replaced by practical policy and strategies, all too often they had returned their gaze backwards

⁶⁷ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 14.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

towards 'the lost agrarian Eden.'⁶⁹ This utopianism acted as a vehicle for their anxieties regarding the modern world and their declining position in American society. The Populist fascination with their own mythology, and the tension between their perceptions and reality led them to view society in dualistic terms. In the words of Sockless Jerry Simpson, 'It is a struggle between the robbers and the robbed.'⁷⁰ As the Populists were on the side of true American virtue, the only explanation for the success of their enemies was that of conspiracy. They were 'innocent pastoral victims of a conspiracy hatched in the distance.'⁷¹ Therefore, American history was to be understood as a perpetual conspiracy of the interests against the people. This conspiratorial vision of history would inevitably have its victims. The city was the symbol of all that was wrong with American society. The fact that the city seemed to have become dominated by immigrants gave the conspiracy theories a nativist theme. As Hofstadter wrote, 'Everyone remote and alien was distrusted and hated – even Americans, if they happened to be city people.' Their concerns with the declining influence of the rural tradition had led them to strike out at those groups they thought symbolised the reasons for this decline.⁷²

Whilst Hofstadter's analysis of the irrational side of the Populist movement proved controversial, it was perhaps his association of the movement with anti-Semitism that proved most inflammatory. Whilst he admitted that on the most part, this anti-Semitism was merely rhetorical, Hofstadter stated, 'It is not too much to say that the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism.'⁷³ For Hofstadter their anti-Semitism was merely another example of the irrationality that had become a feature of the movement. The rise of industrialism and the city and its foreshadowing of the rural economy had come as a great shock to the Populists. Threatened by the rise of the metropolis they failed to adapt to 'the complexities of the modern American life.'⁷⁴ In response, they resorted to a simplistic dualism, with the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁷¹ Ibid., 35.

⁷² Ibid., 82.

⁷³ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

agrarian myth set up in opposition to the realities of the world around them. The inevitable disparity between their mythic vision and twentieth century America fed an irrationality that manifested itself in parochialism, xenophobia and a search for scapegoats.

In his initial correspondence with Knopf about the proposed book, Hofstadter had singled out the chapter in which he dealt with the reactionary side of Populism as being his best.⁷⁵ However, the cautionary comment of one of his graduate students, Eric McKittrick, to an early draft of the work, was an early warning of the criticism that Hofstadter would face for his associating Populism with anti-Semitism. McKittrick wrote Hofstadter, 'There is an ambiguity about the way you use this and you don't make it clear how you want it taken... was this potentially fascist...If this is implied it seems questionable: too big a burden to put on the Populists.'⁷⁶ Yet Hofstadter remained determined that the issue of anti-Semitism was worthy of discussion. Despite the voluminous literature on the Populist movement, Hofstadter noted that 'nothing has been said of its tincture of anti-Semitism.'⁷⁷ It was not central to his discussion, but as he explained to C. Vann Woodward, there was 'enough importance to warrant in all the hundreds of pages that have been written about free silver and Populism, that someone should write a few pages on the subject, lest it be suppressed altogether.' However, the ambiguity that McKittrick had perceived left Hofstadter open to criticism. Hofstadter would later admit that his failure to address the fact that nativism and anti-Semitism were not uncommon in American society in the 1890s led his readers to infer that he was suggesting that the Populists were the 'sole or primary carriers of this kind of feeling.'⁷⁸

It was in Hofstadter's treatment of the Progressive tradition that he would make greatest use of the insights gained from the social sciences. As Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick described, the work of those like Hofstadter's colleague, Merton, provided a

⁷⁵ Hofstadter to Knopf, February 19, 1952, Knopf Papers, Box 170.

⁷⁶ Eric McKittrick to Hofstadter, n.d, RHP, Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁷⁷ Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61.

⁷⁸ Hofstadter to Otis Graham, 31, July, 1969, RHP, Box 4 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

‘reordered intellectual economy.’⁷⁹ The appeal was not that it provided a formal theoretical system of explanation but rather it encouraged a style of thought that chimed with Hofstadter’s own. The movement beyond the simply rational allowed for a greater appreciation of the complexity and paradox that Hofstadter had long felt essential to an understanding of the past. At the root of the Progressive movement was one such paradox. That the movement had emerged at a time of economic stability set it apart from both Populism and the New Deal that followed. As economic concerns, the historical drivers of reform sentiment, appeared to have less relevance, Hofstadter asserted that an alternative explanation was required. Whilst his analysis was, in many ways, multidimensional, it was the concept of status that garnered most attention.

On the whole, the Progressives dispensed with ideological conservatism of their ‘mugwump’ predecessors and, in doing so, were able to find common ground with the American public.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, they retained much of their Yankee-Protestant moralism. In this light, the Progressive era could be seen as a sort of latter-day Protestant revival and a crusade to return to a politics of conscience in an era in which those who controlled power seemed devoid of moral standards. The muckrakers, those journalists and writers who took the role of uncovering the roots of the nation’s ills, were the central figures in the moral crusades of Progressivism. As Hofstadter wrote, ‘it was muckraking that brought the diffuse malaise of the public into focus.’⁸¹ In setting Progressive moralism against the backdrop of the investigative journalism and realist literature, Hofstadter uncovered two key themes, those of the exposure of the hidden, unpleasant ‘reality’ and of the guilt of the comfortable classes.

The reality that they uncovered was one of ‘a series of unspeakable plots, personal iniquities [and] moral failures.’⁸² Corruption abounded and evil doing was discovered in the highest offices. These revelations added weight to the campaigns against both the

⁷⁹ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, “Richard Hofstadter: A Progress,” in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1974), 319.

⁸⁰ It is important to note that Hofstadter sees the impact of rising prices on the standard of living as being pivotal in generating public support for reform. This combined with the rise in consumer consciousness ensured mass appeal for Progressive initiatives – see pp 170-173.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸² Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 202.

political bosses and the increasing power of the trusts. The result of which was real reform in the area of government regulation of business and party organisation. However, Hofstadter observed a dual purpose. There was a sense of personal responsibility inherent within the Protestant mind. The continued exposure of iniquity combined with the lack of a mechanism within the institutions of Protestantism to discharge the sense of guilt led the Progressives to look inward. The reason for the sordid state of the nation was that 'the citizen had relaxed his moral vigilance.'⁸³ For men whose political ideals were based on civic responsibility and mass participation the guilt must be collective. Therefore, muckraking not only played a role in laying out the facts, in order that political action might be taken, but perhaps as importantly, acted as a form of self-flagellation. Reform fulfilled both a personal and a political function. As Dan Singal described, it was, in many ways, 'a symbolic crusade that...provided vital psychic comfort in the midst of rapid social change.'⁸⁴

Progressivism was seen as the reaction of the old-stock American mind to the rapidly changing character of their nation. A revolt against the dominance of machine politics and giant corporations, it harked back to an ideal America characterized by 'a rather broad diffusion of wealth, status and power.'⁸⁵ This desire to reinstate individualism, both in economic and political life was at its core. Whilst they were not faced with the same economic exigencies as the Populists, they shared a common antipathy towards the modern world. This antipathy, as had been the case with the Populists, manifested itself in a Manichaeian vision of politics that inevitably led to moralistic outbursts. It was this same moralism that had provided the impetus for genuine reform in the period that would turn sour in the wake of World War I. Although he did not address the post-war period in any great detail, Hofstadter was keen to note the 'continued coexistence of reformism and reaction' and the inherent ambiguity within a reform tradition determined to stand firm against the tide of change.⁸⁶ The ideals and impulses that had

⁸³ Ibid., 200.

⁸⁴ Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *The American Historical Review*, 89 (1984), 988.

⁸⁵ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 135.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

driven past reform could, under different circumstances, provide the basis for a politics of reaction.

His final chapter set out to show that the history of liberal reform was not one of simple, linear progression and that to view the advocates of modern reform as lineal descendants of earlier reformers failed to grasp the complexity of their history. Hofstadter, as he had indicated in his introduction, broke with the traditional accounts of the New Deal as a continuation of the Populist-Progressive tradition. Whilst the rhetoric was similar and the New Dealers shared the Progressives willingness to involve government in the enactment of reform, the symmetry ended there. Most importantly, the New Deal, rather than positioning itself in opposition to industrial society, accepted it as a fact and set about reforming rather than attempting to destroy it. Whereas the earlier reform movements had been concerned with the democratization of an essentially healthy economic order, the New Deal was faced with an economy in crisis. Roosevelt's administration, faced with the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression, was driven first and foremost by the need to get things done. The need to focus on immediate and critical matters left little energy for moralistic campaigns. Instead, 'at the core of the New Deal...was not a philosophy, but an attitude, suitable for practical politicians, administrators, and technicians, but uncongenial to...moralism.'⁸⁷

Nonetheless, there were some signs of the 'soft' radicalism that had been intrinsic to the earlier reform movements. Hofstadter noted a revival of the old populist sentiment and the demonology of Wall Street that appeared periodically in the speeches of politicians, particularly in campaign years. Alongside this arose a tendency to sentimentalize the 'little people,' the embattled citizens suffering at the hands of the big capitalists who continued to make a profit whilst all around struggled to survive. Yet Hofstadter detects hopefulness even amidst the tragedy. Within the 'soft' side of the New Deal there was a 'sense of the human warmth' that lay under the surface of the nation's inequities. This was contrasted with the Progressive's preoccupation with 'the growing sense of the ugliness under the successful surface of American life.' Whereas previous reform

⁸⁷ Ibid., 325.

movements had arisen to negate the changes in their nation, the New Deal had a greater sense of the country's potential.⁸⁸

The period, although marked by the triumph of action over principle, was not without its 'real ideologues'. Nevertheless, Hofstadter, mindful of the growing tendency amongst those on the right to associate the New Deal with communism, made clear that Marxism had only a marginal effect on both the administration and the popular mind. Marxism had a 'strong if ephemeral' impact on certain intellectuals. However, Communism, 'even in those circles which were its special province' had failed to exert a lasting influence. As he explained, 'it was the depression that began to put American Communism on its feet,' and many within his intellectual circle had felt compelled to choose between capitalism, which appeared to be on its deathbed, and Communism which promised a solution. Yet, his assertion that the New Deal helped to destroy Communism was not true in his own case, as he had only joined the party in 1938, towards the end of the second wave of reforms. His discussion of the relationship between Communism and the New Deal seems clearly intended to set up a binary opposition between liberalism and the 'extreme left'. Undoubtedly, the anti-communism of the period was in his mind and he was keen to dispel the myth that the Communists controlled the New Deal. Nonetheless, despite it merely being a paragraph within a footnote, it seems an oddly reductive analysis of an issue that was laden with complexity.⁸⁹

Whilst the footnote might simply have been a reflection of the sense of embattlement felt by liberal intellectuals, it has an added interest when considered with reference to Hofstadter's own radicalism. He wrote of the contempt towards the New Deal as exhibited by those who remained 'consistent ideologues.' These critics took aim at 'its lack of direction, its unsystematic character, and of course its compromises.'⁹⁰ These criticisms were not greatly removed from those that Hofstadter himself had made in *The American Political Tradition*, a book that was written long after his disillusionment with

⁸⁸ Ibid., 324.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 324n, 325n. It is noteworthy that Hofstadter, whose own, albeit brief, Communist past was unknown at the time references Granville Hicks' *Where We Came Out*, in his discussion of the influence of Communism.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 325n.

Communism. His own work had been symptomatic of the continued existence of a radical intellectual standpoint that existed outside both Communism and mainstream liberalism. Yet, as he wrote the *Age of Reform* his criticism of the New Deal had significantly softened. The lack of consistent ideology that had so worried Hofstadter in *The American Political Tradition* was now seen as something of a virtue. The New Deal saw the 'triumph of economic emergency and human needs over inherited notions and inhibitions.'⁹¹

By the mid-1950s there was a feeling amongst the liberal intellectuals that the time had come to awake from the sentimental illusions of the pre-war period. Hofstadter's work must be seen in this light. The disillusionment of the events of the preceding decades was summed up by Daniel Bell's famous words; 'For the radical intellectual who had articulated the revolutionary impulses of the past century and a half, all this has meant an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apocalyptic thinking – and to ideology.'⁹² The rigid adherence to ideology that had affected some intellectual in the 1930s had prevented them from comprehending the inevitable complexity of the political situation. It was this association of radicalism with rigidity of thought and a dualistic vision of the world that informed much of Hofstadter's view of the reform movement. The fatal flaw of the earlier reform movement had been the superimposition of a single system of interpretation on the unintelligible complexities of American society. It was the New Deal that seemed to have grasped this essential complexity and through ingenuity and experimentation managed to ease America out the Depression. Bell had viewed *The End of Ideology* as an attempt to cleanse liberalism of its tendency to be 'intense, horatory, naïve, [and] simplistic.'⁹³ *The Age of Reform* had similar concerns. As Hofstadter brought his study to a conclusion, he warned, 'we may well sympathize...with those who have shared their need to believe...there was a golden age.... But actually to live in that world...to enjoy its cherished promise...is no longer within our power.'⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., 316.

⁹² Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology : On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, (1960; New York: Free Press, 1962), 393.

⁹³ Ibid., 300.

⁹⁴ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 328.

The book's pre-release press statement had declared, 'This book is a landmark in American political thought,' and the publishers were soon validated in their assessment of the book's significance.⁹⁵ At the time of publication, the work had 'an effect which might best be described as seismic,' and the initial shocks 'were salutary and inspiring.'⁹⁶ The initial reviewers were keen to outline its 'epoch-making' value both as 'an intellectual history of a very high order' and as one of 'great topical interest' with a 'high degree of contemporary utility.'⁹⁷ The reaction of those close to Hofstadter was summed up by Peter Gay when he wrote, 'I am afraid I have nothing but praise...as far as I'm concerned this is history as it should be written.' The positive impressions were not limited to those who shared Hofstadter's viewpoint. George Mowry, who was not uncritical of Hofstadter's analysis, nonetheless prophetically declared, 'This book simply demands consideration for the Pulitzer Prize.'⁹⁸ There would be many, like Mowry, who disagreed with both Hofstadter's methods and his interpretations, but few doubted its importance.

Of all the initial reviews, that of William Appleman Williams came closest to presaging the criticism that would follow in the decade after the publication. His review, entitled 'The Age of Re-Forming History', criticised the award of a Pulitzer Prize. According to Williams, the book was 'not History' but rather 'a transformation of History into Ideology.' Hofstadter was accused of being primarily interested in promoting a liberal ideology rather than writing objective history. *The Age of Reform* was clear evidence that Hofstadter had turned away from his early radical promise and Williams saw this as indicative of a general move towards conservatism of 'the ascendant group of American intellectuals'. In this light the work was one of self-validation, its appeal based on the fact that it explained and justified 'what the liberal has been doing – and what he has not done.' Hofstadter's use of the status thesis had essentially condemned any opponents of the dominant liberal system to irrationality and ensured that complaints regarding post-

⁹⁵ Harold Strauss, Press Statement, 24 January, 1955 attached to letter to Hofstadter, March 25, 1955, Knopf Papers, Box 170.

⁹⁶ Elkins and McKittrick, *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, 322.

⁹⁷ Daniel Boorstin, "New View of Reform," *Commentary*, April 1956; David Fellman, *Age of Reform*, *New Republic*, October 24, 1955; Denis Brogan, *Age of Reform*, *New York Times Book Review*, October 1955.

⁹⁸ George E. Mowry, *The Age of Reform*, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, March 1956, 769.

war liberalism could be disregarded as products of a paranoid mind. In his scathing assessment, Williams charged Hofstadter with directing the attention away from the truth and providing support for the existing institutions in their continued manipulation of the people. Hofstadter's present-mindedness was a cause of considerable concern for Williams. As one of a group of intellectuals 'so wholly immersed in contemporary American society' he was unable to 'deal with the past, present, or future save in terms of the present.'⁹⁹

Williams' review gave a foretaste of much of the later criticism of Hofstadter's work, particularly from those historians that would be associated with the New Left. Central to this criticism was the concept of consensus. Whilst *The American Political Tradition* has come to be considered as an initial statement of the consensus school of history, the term only came into use after Higham's 1959 essay. In his essay Higham accused historians of carrying out 'a massive grading operation to smooth over America's social convulsions'. Whilst *The Age of Reform* is mentioned in passing as an example of the counter-Progressive tendency, the central figure in the essay was not Hofstadter, but Daniel Boorstin. Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics* had celebrated the lack of coherent political philosophy, and competing ideologies in America as a triumphant success. In his analysis he 'crisply summarized and foreshadowed the new trend in American historiography: the appeal to homogeneity, continuity, and national character.' Whilst Higham's essay had been careful to distinguish between those who celebrated the supposed unity of the American past, and those who saw it as cause for concern, the term consensus quickly became a pejorative descriptor.¹⁰⁰

As the criticism of *The Age of Reform* accumulated in the 1960s we see the coalescing of the reaction against consensus history and the antipathy towards those liberal intellectuals who were considered to have forsaken their radicalism for veneration of the pluralist system. To the younger historians, many of whom were politically involved, the Populists were seen as kindred spirits, as radicals attempting to

⁹⁹ William Appleman Williams, "The Age of Re-Forming History," *Nation*, (30 June 1956), 552-554.

¹⁰⁰ John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, (February 1, 1959), 96-98.

democratize the industrial system. One of this younger generation, Norman Pollack, expended a great deal of effort on refuting Hofstadter's interpretation of the Populists.¹⁰¹ According to Pollack, 'Hofstadter's basic methodological assumption is his consensus thesis.' In his use of psychology Hofstadter had imposed a static model of society on social movements that by their nature are fluid. In doing so, he had failed to engage with the historical and sociological factors. Pollack pointed to the 'obvious defect of psychological analysis in 'its tendency to highlight deviation from society without directing attention to the causes of protest.' As a result, Hofstadter was guilty of dismissing all calls for social change as irrational.¹⁰²

Pollack's criticism was the cause of both annoyance and a certain degree of surprise. As Hofstadter explained in a later letter to Otis Graham, 'I think I gave a rather old-fashioned economic interpretation of the origins of Populism, hinging essentially on the prices of three commodities: cotton, wheat, and silver.'¹⁰³ It is interesting that later critics seem to have lost sight of the fact that Hofstadter's was at pains to ground his analysis in the economic concerns of the Populists and real political progress that they made. As they wrote their memorial essay in 1974, Elkins and McKittrick noted that they had been unprepared 'for how little the book's persuasiveness has diminished.' Whilst there was some degree of ambiguity in the work Hofstadter had 'covered himself at every turn'. Despite his interest in the 'psychic components' of the reformers he had 'allowed for an objective validity in each of the aims the reformers pursued.'¹⁰⁴ That critics like Pollack had failed to grasp that Hofstadter's aim was to give equal attention to the manifest and latent functions of protest, and to attach no greater significance to either was perhaps more indicative of their own political standpoint.

The charge that Hofstadter's study of the reform movements was symbolic of the liberal intellectuals' defence of the American political system was most clearly expressed in

¹⁰¹ Pollack's works include "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of *The Age of Reform*," *Journal of Southern History*, (November 1960), 478 – 500; "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review*, (October 1962), 76 – 80; "Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism, and the Historian," *Agricultural History*, (April 1965), 59 – 67.

¹⁰² Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism," 479, 496.

¹⁰³ Hofstadter to Otis Graham, 31, July 1969, RHP, Box 4 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

¹⁰⁴ Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter," 325-326.

Michael P. Rogin's *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*. Whilst primarily a study of McCarthyism, Rogin called into question a political and historical point of view that he defined as 'pluralism'. This viewpoint, which he sees as underpinning Hofstadter's study, was markedly conservative, concerned with political stability and suspicious of mass movements. In inflating the threat of McCarthyism and imposing personal concerns upon their studies, they had been guilty of refracting 'American history through the myopia of a traumatized intelligentsia.'¹⁰⁵ In Rogin's analysis, Hofstadter had failed to separate present political concerns from his historical analysis, a failure that had led him to dismiss the rational demands of the reformers. Hofstadter's overriding desire to venerate the pluralist system and to impugn its challengers had led to defective history. However, Rogin's equation of the concept of status with a defence of pluralism is debatable. As Elkins and McKittrick suggest, to explain Hofstadter's work in terms of 'pluralism' is to take less seriously the extent to which his concerns were analytical and not ideological'.¹⁰⁶

It was not only the younger generation that took exception to Hofstadter's suggestion that the Populists had a nasty underbelly. Woodward, a close friend, was eager to challenge some of the assertions made regarding the Populists and his measured response was published as, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual". Woodward pointed to the reassessment of Populism as an important corrective to the hagiographical accounts of Populism from the pre-war period. However, books like *The Age of Reform* were in danger of replacing the previously held stereotype of Populism's virtue with a new negative stereotype. Woodward wrote, 'The old one sometimes approached the formulation that Populism is the root of all good in democracy, while the new one sometimes suggests that Populism is the root of all evil.'¹⁰⁷ Whilst he admitted that Hofstadter's study was more balanced than many of the studies on Populism, Woodward saw the view of Populism as a precursor to contemporary reactionary movements as ahistorical and overly influenced by present concerns.

¹⁰⁵ Michael P. Rogin, *Intellectuals and McCarthy: Radical Specter*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter," 342.

¹⁰⁷ C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 147.

There was also a clear geographical dimension to the differing perceptions of the Populists. Whilst Hofstadter had bemoaned the dearth of studies that addressed the reactionary side of the movement, he did refer to a 1944 essay by his Columbia colleague Daniel Bell, entitled "The Grass Roots of American Jew Hatred". Bell who had been influenced by his work with the Frankfurt School intellectuals saw the reactionary outbursts of the Populists as evidence of that tendency within mass political movements to find targets for their frustration. Populism was 'an illustration of the grotesque transformation of an originally progressive idea, under the impact of modern capitalism.' Another historian, with close ties to the New York intellectuals, Oscar Handlin published a 1951 article, "Americans Views of the Jews at the Opening of the Twentieth Century". Handlin saw the financial crises of the 1890s as central to the rising tide of anti-Semitism amongst the Populists. As the farmers saw their financial position weaken, the Jews became symbolic of profiteering financiers and bankers, who were to blame for their plight. These writers, alongside Hofstadter, brought a distinctly urban and Jewish perspective to their studies of the rural reformers. It was a perspective that brought them into conflict with those liberal historians who had been educated in the mid-West and the South.¹⁰⁸

In response to *The Age of Reform*, John D. Hicks wrote that whilst Hofstadter understood the urban America of New York, he believed that 'his background [was] quite inadequate for any reasonable understanding of Populism.'¹⁰⁹ Howard Beale expressed a similar view when he accused Hofstadter of having a 'sophisticated New Yorker's lack of understanding of the rest of the country.'¹¹⁰ It is unquestionable that Hofstadter and his Columbia colleagues viewed the reform movement from a perspective that was distinctly urban. Hofstadter's distaste for the rural mind, which was further strengthened by his experiences in Maryland was undoubtedly a product of his own cosmopolitanism. As Robert Collins wrote, in his discussion of *The Age of Reform*, "To the literary radicals who identified themselves as part of an urban intelligentsia, in

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Bell, "The Grass Roots of American Jew Hatred," *Jewish Frontier*, June 1944, 15-20; Oscar Handlin, "American Views of the Jews at the Opening of the Twentieth Century," *American Jewish Historical Society*, June 1951.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 340.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

particular, the “idiocy of the village”, its anti-intellectualism and provincialism, seemed directly opposed to cosmopolitan values.’¹¹¹ For the historian who equated ruralism with anti-intellectualism and political reaction, the discovery of the link between Populism and reactionary politics was inevitable. As Singal pointed out, ‘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 his beliefs.’¹¹² This threat and Hofstadter’s defence of intellect against it in its various guises is the subject of my next chapter.

¹¹¹ Robert M. Collins, “The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism,” *The Journal of American History*, 76 (1989), 164.

¹¹² Singal, “Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography,” 991.

In Defence of Intellect: *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

The dialogue amongst intellectuals regarding the future of liberalism had been accompanied by a reconsideration of their changing relationship to American society. The sense of cautious contentment that Hofstadter had expressed in *The Age of Reform* was given clearest voice by *Partisan Review* in a 1952 symposium entitled "Our Country and Our Culture". The symposium, which spanned several issues and featured contributions from twenty-five of the most influential voices within the New York intellectual community, marked an apparent turning point. The editorial statement pointed to the 'apparent fact that American intellectuals now regard American and its institutions in a new way.'¹ The experiences of the post-war years, the polarization of world politics and a real sense of the fragility of democracy had forced intellectuals, who had for many years been vociferous critics of their nation, to reassess their position. The choice now seemed both urgent and stark: defend freedom or support totalitarianism. In this light, the American political system, despite its failings, had inherent positive value, all the more so as it appeared the only effective bulwark against totalitarianism. Of the contributors to the symposium, only three declared themselves to be at odds with the affirmative attitude expressed by the editors: Irving Howe, Norman Mailer, and C. Wright Mills.

The hopes and fears outlined in the *Partisan Review* symposium reflected the views of many within the liberal intellectual community, particularly those who had come of age in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the focus of Hofstadter's work in the period suggests that any sense of contentment was overshadowed by a deep concern that there was a darker side to American democracy. Daniel Bell spoke of the impact of both Stalinism and the Holocaust on Hofstadter's thinking. The events of the 1940s had led to a fear of mass action and suspicion of populist movements which threatened to 'tear down the very

¹ Editorial Statement, "Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium," *Partisan Review*, May-June 1952, 282.

fragile bonds of society'.² In his work he uncovered a long history of conflict between the democratic masses and the intellectual in America, a conflict which was frequently accompanied by reactionary politics. Indeed, he concluded that American popular democracy was, by its very nature, hostile to intellect. It was this conclusion that led him to the worrying discovery that McCarthyism was not an aberration in American history but a product of the peculiar character of American democracy.

Hofstadter's next major work, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, was published in 1963, some eight years after *The Age of Reform*, yet its origins considerably pre-date the publication of the earlier work. Indeed, *Anti-Intellectualism* was, in many ways, a summation of concerns, both political and intellectual, that had exercised Hofstadter for more than a decade. It was his research on the American education system, often overlooked in discussions of his thought, that first alerted him to the lowly position of the intellectual in American history. As he commenced work on an essay for the Commission on Financing Higher Education, he wrote a letter to Merle Curti in which he expressed a degree of surprise at 'how much there is to be learned about Am intellectual life from the study of higher education in this way'.³ What Hofstadter learnt was to have a significant impact both on his future work and his understanding of the contemporary political situation in America.

The Association of American Universities had established the Commission on Financing Higher Education in 1949 to address the financial problems facing universities in the post-war era. It became apparent during the Commission's initial research that there was a general ignorance regarding the purpose of higher education, and if they were to garner support for funding, citizens must be convinced of the value of both its goals and methods. Hofstadter's brief was to relate 'some of the broad developments in higher education to the background of which they were a part'.⁴ In assessing this development, he examined how institutions of learning had viewed their role and how they were forced, often unwillingly, to respond to the prevailing climate of American society.

² Daniel Bell, "Richard Hofstadter Project," OHRO.

³ Hofstadter to Merle Curti, undated [February/March, 1951], Merle Curti Papers.

⁴ Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), viii.

Although intended originally to be solely for the information of the Commission, the essay was published alongside that of staff member C. DeWitt Hardy's in a 1952 book entitled *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States*.

Hofstadter began his study with a summary of the changing focus of education in the college era. The curricula of the early colleges reflected a vision of education which was free of practical or vocational concerns and designed simply 'for the strengthening and adornment of the mind.'⁵ However, by the nineteenth century, American society had become 'too democratic' to accept the idea of an education for gentlemen, 'too philistine' to understand the value of its classical content, and 'too dynamic' to accept the concept of static knowledge.⁶ By the 1870s, American college education had reached a crisis point and the falling numbers of students reflected the widening breach between the colleges and wider society. Yet the education system did not collapse. Instead a period of revolutionary change was ushered in as the rapid development of American industry in the post-Civil War period fuelled a demand for new skills. Perhaps more importantly, it provided the financial backing for the establishment and the maintenance of those institutions of learning that would provide for the nation's needs. As Hofstadter described it, 'The age of the college had passed, and the age of the university was dawning.'⁷

There is a marked sense of ambivalence in Hofstadter's account of the rise of the university. It was undoubted that there had been great strides in scientific research and that the new institutions were more attuned to the needs of the community of which they were part. However, it was regretted that the 'feeling that the life of the mind should have an independent weight of its own in affairs was stifled rather than encouraged.'⁸ Hofstadter bemoaned the fact that practicality had triumphed over intellect, and that the link between intellectual life and personal character had been sadly lost. The value of individual mind had become secondary to the broader requirements of society.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

The university system provided an increased focus on specialised research and as a consequence of this, an increasing division of intellectual labour. Whilst this led to greater rigour and higher standards, it also intensified the narrowing of intellectual pursuits. The study of history was a case in point, as the 'intense examination of minutiae' came at the expense of historical writing that sought to place new discoveries in their broader philosophical context.⁹ The increasing specialisation had an equally deleterious effect on the professional schools, as wider intellectual and cultural concerns were dismissed in favour of a narrow subject specific curriculum. The result was a professional class who were 'social[ly] and culturally myopic'.¹⁰ Yet Hofstadter admitted that there was much to be praised about the new system of graduate education. He applauded 'the contributions of research to American life' and 'the material and intellectual wellbeing of our society'.¹¹ The universities had been remarkably successful in fulfilling their obligations to the communities which they served. However, Hofstadter warned of the danger of loss of intellectualism if service to the community was not balanced by an equal 'obligation to its own innermost promptings and wants, a firmer and more self-confident dedication to the life of the mind'.¹²

If the Commission had hoped for an optimistic appraisal of the state of American higher education, Hofstadter's final pages were likely to disappoint. Hofstadter contended that American culture, one that was dominated by the ethos of business, was at odds with the true aims of education. The relegation of learning to an instrument towards other ends led educationalists to justify their purpose in terms of utility. This reluctance to 'admit that enjoyment of the life of the mind is a legitimate and important consummation' served only to confirm the general prejudice against intellect.¹³ Furthermore, the mass character of American education, whilst justified in terms of democracy, had led to the trivialisation of learning and the vulgarisation of the university system. It was, as

⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹ Ibid., 66.

¹² Ibid., 103.

¹³ Ibid., 104.

Hofstadter described, 'democracy with a vengeance'.¹⁴ The picture he painted was not one that held out much hope. In his concluding remarks, he called for an appreciation that education be seen 'not as a necessary instrument of external ends, but as an end in itself.'¹⁵ Given his assessment of the past, such appreciation, particularly amongst those upon whom the universities depended on for financial support, seemed unlikely.

Hofstadter's study of higher education had revealed to him a perennial conflict in American democracy between the desires of the masses and the needs of the mind. This was no more apparent than during the 1952 presidential election. For Hofstadter, the election laid bare the breach between intellectuals and the wider American public. Whereas the 1948 presidential election had been characterized by a split amongst liberal intellectuals, the 1952 election saw a considerable degree of unanimity. In Adlai Stevenson, they had a candidate who seemed to be one of their own. Indeed, Hofstadter rather uncharacteristically became swept up in the political campaign and invested considerable energy and time in support of Stevenson.¹⁶ It was perhaps the fact that Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had accepted the Republican nomination, happened also to be the president of Columbia University that stirred Hofstadter and his colleagues to act. Eisenhower, who had been appointed by the Columbia trustees for his international reputation rather than his suitability as a university administrator, was not a popular figure amongst the university faculty. His frequent absences due to outside commitments and seeming unwillingness to engage with those within the university created significant ill-feeling. These grievances were compounded by his political opposition to federal aid for higher education and his 'unabashed non-intellectualism'.¹⁷

The thought that the dismantling of the achievements of a quarter century of liberal administrations was being plotted within the walls of the university itself was bound to provoke a reaction. The October 2nd edition of the *Columbia Daily Spectator* gave some sense of the magnitude of dismay felt at Morningside. The editors broke with a long-

¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹⁶ Frank Freidel, "Richard Hofstadter Project."; H. Stuart Hughes, "Richard Hofstadter Project", OHRO.

¹⁷ Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 340.

standing tradition of political neutrality and announced their support for Stevenson.¹⁸ The students' endorsement of Stevenson shared the front page with a report that a group of over one hundred faculty members had voted unanimously to establish the "Columbia Faculty Volunteers for Stevenson". This preliminary session saw Allan Nevins named as chairman and Hofstadter appointed to the seven-man executive committee. The assembled academics agreed on an immediate plan of action to write letters to the Republican press and to make themselves available for television and radio programs supportive of Stevenson.¹⁹ A further suggestion, that of a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, was not formally approved but a draft statement for this purpose was to be prepared by Hofstadter in advance of the next meeting.

The sense of embattlement amongst liberal intellectuals had been heightened when the *Times*, a newspaper they considered to be their own, came out for Eisenhower. The *Times's* surprising endorsement led thirty-one prominent academics—including Hofstadter, Nevins, Henry Steele Commager and Reinhold Niebuhr—to write a letter of protest. The authors proclaimed themselves to be 'chagrined and bewildered' by the support for Eisenhower's candidacy. The stubborn refusal of the editors to admit to the fact that its own columns seemed so clearly to have revealed—Taft's influence over Eisenhower—seemed uncharacteristically reckless. The letter warned that 'those who still support the Eisenhower-Taft coalition take too great a chance with the nation's destiny.' In conclusion, it exhorted the editors to recognise the danger before it was too late.²⁰

Six days after the letter of protest, the "Columbia Faculty Volunteers for Stevenson" placed their advertisement. The statement, "We are for Stevenson because..." outlined the key reasons for their support. The academics were impressed by the fact that he had 'appealed not to unreasoning sentiment but to the sober judgment of the electorate.' In doing so, his campaign was a 'landmark in the history of American politics.' The advertisement pointed to the fact that Stevenson had a successful history of skilful

¹⁸ "Why Stevenson?", *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 2, 1952, 1.

¹⁹ "Stevenson Backed by Columbia Group", *The New York Times*, October 2, 1952, 21.

²⁰ "Eisenhower Support Queried: Eisenhower-Taft Coalition Believed a Risk to Nation's Destiny," Letter to the *The New York Times*, October 11, 1952, 18.

administration, and that his policies offered an affirmative foreign policy, opposition to both Communism and McCarthyism, and the hope of further social reform. Perhaps, most importantly, he was a man of principle, who impressed with his 'intelligence, his humility, his dignity.' In this critical hour of the nation's history, Stevenson offered 'the wisest, steadiest and most responsible leadership.'²¹

A week later, on October 23, "Columbia University Faculty and Staffs for Eisenhower" placed an advertisement in both the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *Times*. Peter Gay, who had caught wind of the plans, picked up the early edition of the *Herald-Tribune* and made his way to Hofstadter's apartment to scrutinize the advertisement. It soon became clear that very few of the signatories were familiar names. By cross-referencing the names against the *Columbia University Directory*, Hofstadter and Gay discovered bookstore clerks, secretaries and many others who would only loosely be considered 'staff'. Later that morning the front page of the *Times* announced that the "Election of Eisenhower Is Urged by 714 on the Faculty of Columbia." Gay immediately called the *Times* to challenge the list of signatories and a counter-statement was included in subsequent editions of the newspaper. The challengers, named in the *Times* as Gay, Hofstadter, Justus Buchler and Paul Seabury 'charged the Eisenhower group with deliberate misrepresentation intended to mislead the readers.' They complained that 324 of the names did not appear on the university directory, and that of the remainder, only 259 could be considered to be of similar professional standing as those signers of the Stevenson advertisement. The inclusion of 'dieticians, building superintendents, stenographers and students, including non-matriculated students,' belied the claim that the number of signatories evidenced the fact that the majority of Columbia was in favour of Eisenhower. Indeed, when only faculty members were included, the numbers clearly showed that Stevenson had the greatest support.²²

²¹ Volunteers for Stevenson on the Columbia University Faculties and Staff, "We are for Stevenson because...", *The New York Times*, October 16, 1952, 21.

²² Jacobs, *Eisenhower at Columbia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. 2001), 298; "Election of Eisenhower Is Urged By 714 on Various Columbia Staffs", *The New York Times*, October 23, 1952, 1, 4.

Whilst the battle of the advertisements was a clear reflection of the strength of feeling on the Columbia campus, it also served to illuminate the wider issue of the disconnect between the intellectuals and the public as a whole. The intellectuals' passionate support for Stevenson had not escaped the attention of Republicans and the suspicion of intellect characteristic of the McCarthy wing of the party became central to the campaign. The term 'egghead', originally a good-humoured description of an intellectual, quickly became a pejorative word used to elicit a sense of distrust and suspicion. The egghead was a 'person of intellectual pretensions, often a professor,' who was 'superficial...feminine...surfeited with conceit.' The election of Stevenson would mean such men would again seize power and send the country on the 'scenic railway of muddled economics, Socialism, Communism, crookedness and psychopathic instability.' The potency of the term egghead during the election campaign reflected the culmination of a hatred of intellectuals that had been bubbling under the surface since the New Deal and had given impetus to the movement behind McCarthy. Stevenson, the archetypal egghead in the minds of his critics, represented all that they felt to have been wrong with the politics of the past twenty years.²³

Eisenhower's landslide victory in November was an emphatic rejection of Stevenson. Whilst he did not lose the election simply because of his erudition, Stevenson's defeat suggested that the electorate was significantly more impressed by the virtues of a man of action than those of a man of ideas. For commentators on both sides, the decisive defeat of Stevenson was a repudiation not only of the candidate himself but of the nation's intellectuals. As *Time* magazine reported, the election disclosed 'an alarming fact, long suspected: there is a wide and unhealthy gap between the American intellectuals and the people.'²⁴ In the opinion of Hofstadter and his intellectual peers, the triumph of philistinism and the seemingly widespread acceptance of the vitriolic anti-intellectualism of the McCarthyite Republicans were portends of troubled times ahead. The *Partisan Review* symposium earlier that year, which had declared an era of reconciliation between American intellectuals and their society, now appeared to mark

²³ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Highbrow in American Politics," *Partisan Review* (March/April 1953), 157, 159, 161.

²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 4.

the 'end, and not the beginning of an epoch.'²⁵ As Schlesinger regretfully pointed out, the intellectuals in America were on the run.

Hofstadter reflected on the election result in a lecture, "Democracy and Anti-Intellectualism", which he delivered at the University of Michigan in April 1953. Like Schlesinger he saw the overt anti-intellectualism of the campaign as both a reaction against the New Deal and the high-water mark of long-standing resentment towards the country's intellectuals. In the discovery of the term 'egghead', Hofstadter suggested, 'the nation...found the epithet for the intellectuals that it had so long wanted.' The strength of this palpable animus had forced American intellectuals into a defensive posture. This was compounded by McCarthyism's popular appeal and the disproportionate influence that he and his small group of political allies had come to exert. The pressure to conform was having a significant impact on the intellectual life of the nation. In Hofstadter's opinion, the period marked 'a crisis in the history of the intelligentsia.' However, it was not the external threat to intellect that was his greatest concern, but what he saw as the 'eager capitulation' of those whose role it should have been to defend the life of the mind. Whilst conscious that academics were but part of the wider intellectual community, Hofstadter saw the wilful concession to the forces of anti-intellectualism within the education system as symptomatic of a general failure of nerve. His lecture was, in many ways, a rallying cry and a reminder of their responsibility to stand strong in the face of the enemy.²⁶

Hofstadter's earlier study of American higher education had shown that the history of anti-intellectualism could not be explained without also considering the strength of popular democracy in America. In his lecture, he wished to draw further attention to the fact, too often ignored, that 'higher education and democracy have often been at odds.' However, he was at pains to make it clear his was not a criticism of democracy but the peculiar variant of democracy that held sway in America, that of populist democracy, or the government 'by or through the mass man.' In terms of education, this translated

²⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Highbrow in American Politics," 162.

²⁶ Richard Hofstadter, "Democracy and Anti-Intellectualism in America," *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review*, (Summer 1953), 281,282.

into the principle that institutions of higher learning existed purely to serve the needs of the people. The suggestion that learning might be a worthy goal in-and-of-itself was considered 'offensive to mass democracy.' Indeed, college presidents became complicit in the equation of education with utility as they were always careful to outline the social role played by their institutions. Much to Hofstadter's displeasure, it was very rare for them to 'point to the glories or pleasures of the human mind as an end in itself.'²⁷

Hofstadter concluded by calling for intellectuals to stand confidently in defence of intellect. He beseeched his audience that they discard their 'false piety for populist democracy' and their 'sense of guilt at daring to suggest that there is anything wrong with the mob.' A dedication to the life of the mind would inevitably bring the intellectual into conflict with the majority, but they must retain their autonomy. They must not abandon their values simply because they are not shared by wider society or fool themselves into believing that their interests were those of the majority. Hofstadter demanded the realisation that intellectuals were not at one with the people and that they should cherish and protect their spiritual autonomy and the freedom that that afforded them to determine their own position. As they often stood alone, they were an easy target and would, as was the case in the current climate, be the target of open animus. However, they should remain confident in their task and to 'show cohesion and firmness under fire.' In doing so, their allegiance to the spiritual values of intellect was their most valuable defence.²⁸

On March 25, 1954, Hofstadter delivered a lecture at Barnard College as part of a series of lectures on "The Search for New Standards in Modern America." At the request of the directors of the organisers, Hofstadter took the subject of dissent in America. His lecture, "Dissent and Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century," would later appear in edited form in the Winter issue of *The American Scholar* as "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt." Hofstadter later noted that this essay aroused more attention than any other he

²⁷ Ibid., 285, 286.

²⁸ Ibid., 295.

had written to that point.²⁹ This attention owed much to what he himself described as his wandering ‘into the province of the social psychologist,’ a path he had felt compelled to take to explain the otherwise inexplicable attraction of McCarthy.³⁰ It came at a time when several other writers, amongst them a number of his Columbia colleagues, were attempting to make sense of McCarthyism in similar terms. *The New American Right*, edited by Daniel Bell and published in 1955, brought these interpretations together in what became a seminal text on the subject. As Bell explained, the idea of a collective statement had its origin in Columbia University’s Seminar on the State, a multidisciplinary discussion of political behaviour.³¹ In fact, Hofstadter had delivered his paper on the pseudo-conservative revolt to the seminar a day before his lecture at Barnard.

Despite Hofstadter’s statement in the introductory notes to the “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt” published in his own collection *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, the essay cannot be considered simply to be a published version of the lecture. The lecture notes for the address at Barnard show it to have a broader scope than the seminar paper and the subsequent essay. Whilst this may simply be due to Hofstadter having to ensure that his exposition on pseudo-conservatism fulfilled the brief of the lecture, it is nevertheless worthy of attention, particularly for his assessment of the intellectuals’ shift from radicalism. In the clear distinction that he made between dissent and non-conformity he provided an alternative, and compelling, interpretation of the changing political perspectives of his generation.

Hofstadter asserted that the shift in emphasis from political dissent to the defence of non-conformity that now characterized his own writing and that of his intellectual peers was not symptomatic of a rejection of their principles. Indeed, it had been their non-conformity which had been the central quality of their way of thinking and the guiding force behind their earlier radicalism. The primary motive of the non-conformist,

²⁹ Hofstadter, “Dissent and Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century,” Lecture notes, RHP Box 35 Misc. Notes; Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” *The American Scholar*, 24 (Winter 1954-55), 9-27.

³⁰ Hofstadter, “Dissent and Nonconformity”, Lecture notes, 16.

³¹ Daniel Bell (ed.), *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion, 1955); *The Radical Right: The New American Right expanded and updated* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), ix.

Hofstadter explained, was the search for freedom, and this continued to inform their activities, both political and intellectual. During the Depression years, they had been convinced that capitalism and a political system that worked only for the few posed the greatest threat to the freedom, and in this period of intense dissent, their radicalism and non-conformity worked perfectly in union. Despite a strong emotional commitment to dissent, two decades of liberal reform had led to a degree of satisfaction and comfort. Hofstadter willingly accepted that Adlai Stevenson had won the support of large numbers of liberal intellectuals 'not in spite of but in part because of that air of poised and reliable conservatism that he brought.' Politically, these intellectuals retained impulses that had animated them in the 1930s, but they now lacked 'the ardent animus, the dynamic energies, that go with dissent.' Although dissatisfied with Eisenhower, they were driven less by an appetite for change and more by the need to retain what had been achieved in the New Deal era. What had not been lost was their commitment to non-conformity and to freedom, both of which were being threatened by a new wave of political dissent, that of the pseudo-conservatives.³²

Whilst his reading of Mannheim had motivated him to probe the links between styles of thought and social situations, it was the insights offered by Freudian psychology, albeit filtered through the work of others, that provided much of the basis for Hofstadter's assessment of the pseudo-conservatives. To a certain extent Hofstadter's use of psychological concepts reflected the influential position that psychiatry had come to hold within post-war American culture. As *Time* magazine declared, 'Psychology has burst out of the consulting room and clinic, spreading all through life and leaving nothing untouched—neither love nor the machine, war nor politics, neither art nor morals nor God.'³³ However, Hofstadter's interest had pre-dated psychology's explosion into the public realm. Whilst writing *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter had come across Harold Lasswell's *Psychopathology and Politics*. Although this book had introduced psychoanalytical concepts into political studies over a decade earlier, the historical profession had been slow to engage with the insights provided. Hofstadter, who had been searching for a means of making sense of the relationship between

³² Ibid, 1, 10, 11.

³³ "The Wise Old Man," *Time* magazine, February 14, 1955.

politics and life beyond the rational and economic, was quick to see the possibilities that these new concepts offered.

Lasswell's work was particularly influential in early studies of both Nazism and Communism. His 1930 definition of politics as 'the process by which the irrational bases of society are brought out into the open' seemed eminently instructive to those seeking to make sense of the rise of totalitarianism. However, as Alexander Dunst points out, it was the 1950 publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, a collaborative study completed by several Frankfurt School theorists, which had the greatest impact on Hofstadter and his Columbia colleagues.³⁴ The minutes to the Columbia seminar at which Hofstadter first presented his paper made clear that *The Authoritarian Personality* 'furnished some of the insights and concepts...including that of the title.'³⁵ The pseudo-conservative, Adorno had suggested, was characterised by an unconscious and deep-seated impulse towards rebellion and destruction which found rationalisation in conservatism and conformity.³⁶ It was this uncovering of the irrational desires that lay beneath the conservative rhetoric which provided Hofstadter with the foundation from which to construct his own analysis. In a direct quotation from Adorno, he defined the pseudo-conservative as one 'who, in the name of upholding traditional American values and institutions and defending against more or less fictitious characters...aims at their abolition.'³⁷ However, whilst Hofstadter wholeheartedly accepted Adorno's description of the irrational nature of pseudo-conservatism, he retained little of the explicitly Freudian interpretative framework. Whereas Adorno found the origins of the authoritarian personality in the social environment experienced in childhood, Hofstadter detected a distinctly American character to the movement.³⁸

³⁴ Alexander Dunst, *Madness in Cold War America*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 16,17: T.W. Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice Vol. 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 1.

³⁵ Minutes of Eleventh Meeting, 1953-54, Seminar Series 401: The State, March 24, 1954, Box 146, Columbia Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.

³⁶ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 373, 374.

³⁷ Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt", *The American Scholar*, 24 (Winter, 1954-55), 11.

³⁸ In the published version Hofstadter does make reference to parental authority and the inability of pseudo-conservatives to understand personal relationships in terms other than domination or submission. This is discussed in relation to status and is not central to his argument. It is not contained at all within the initial lecture. "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt", 20, 21.

When delivering the lecture at Barnard, Hofstadter made clear the speculative nature of his analysis by declaring that in his own mind, it was 'no more than a fairly informed guess.'³⁹ Typically, he followed his qualified introductory remarks with an exposition that seemed utterly convincing to all those who heard, or later read, his analysis. Hofstadter identified the single most important factor in the appeal of pseudo-conservatism as that of status dissatisfaction. America was a country 'of people whose status expectations are random and uncertain, and yet whose status expectations have been whipped up to a high pitch by our democratic ethos and our rags-to-riches mythology.'⁴⁰ This uncertainty of status weighed most heavily on two distinct groups within American society. As Hofstadter would describe in *The Age of Reform*, the old-stock Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had lost their economic advantage were determined to hold on to the last vestiges of their social status. The crankiness he had identified had grown stronger as their position in society had weakened. The opportunity to vent their discontent through ethnic and religious snobbery had diminished due to the growing influence and power of those they had previously poured scorn upon. Instead they now turned their attentions to liberals, those on the political left and intellectuals, for 'in true pseudo-conservative fashion they relish weak victims and shrink from asserting themselves against the strong'.⁴¹ Whilst the direction of travel for the immigrant population was in the opposite direction, they were beset by their own status concerns. Despite establishing themselves economically and playing an increased role in the social and cultural life of the nation, the memories of the suspicion with which they had once been viewed led to a continued sense of unease regarding their Americanism. In an effort to assert their identity as Americans they became active participants in patriotic societies and vocal opponents of all that might be considered disloyal. The target of their ire was, for differing reasons, the same as that of the old-stock Americans, for to their mind 'it is no special virtue to be more American than the Rosenbergs, but it really

³⁹ Hofstadter, "Dissent and Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century", lecture delivered at Barnard College, March 25, 1954, Lecture notes, 13. RHP Box 35

⁴⁰ Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt", 17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

is something to be more American than Dean Acheson or John Foster Dulles – or Franklin Delano Roosevelt.’⁴²

The discontent into which McCarthy had successfully tapped was not new, but its particular strength owed much to the confluence of issues that challenged the political stability of mid-century America. As Hofstadter was careful to note, ‘we must remember, it is a response, however unrealistic, to realities.’ Whilst opportunities for social and economic advancement remained, a rise in status was no longer automatic or guaranteed. The discontent aroused by status frustration was further magnified by the growth of the mass media, which had led politics to become a form of entertainment and for the voting public to feel a much greater sense of involvement in the political drama. This radical change in the political environment had led politics to become ‘an arena into which private emotions and personal problems can be readily projected.’ As a political constituency, those who supported McCarthy had a surfeit of personal discontentment. Decades of feeling powerless in the face of a left-wing administration which seemed intent on destroying everything they held dear had aroused a growing sense of outrage. In this respect, their anger was not completely unjustified. New Deal liberalism had held sway for a considerable period of time. Furthermore, there was evidence that Soviet spies had managed to infiltrate the Roosevelt government. As Hofstadter described, there were enough real grievances ‘to give a touch of credibility to the melodramatics of the pseudo-conservative imagination.’⁴³

Hofstadter made it clear that he did not share the fear of some liberals that McCarthyism had sufficient strength to overwhelm the political mainstream. Indeed, he felt it to have passed its peak of influence. Nevertheless, a contemporaneous letter suggests that the level of fear felt on a personal level remained pronounced. In response to correspondence from Pat Knopf in which he had discussed plans to publish *The American Political Tradition* under the Vintage banner, Hofstadter revealed the strength of his concern at drawing the attention of the McCarthyites. Knopf had suggested that seven thousand copies of the book be sold to the State Department, an idea that

⁴² Ibid., 24.

⁴³ Ibid., 26.

provoked an unequivocally negative response. Hofstadter felt that the iconoclastic tone of the work was likely to 'offend true-blue one-hundred percent American halfwits.' If sold to the State Department, the book became public property and, as a result, Hofstadter feared that he could be 'subjected to an unscrupulous inquisition by some Congressional Hawkshaw.' He even questioned the morality of a publisher who would expose an author to such scrutiny and declared there to be 'no possible financial inducement that would be sufficient to cause me on my own volition to take the risk of being harassed and humiliated by some of the imbeciles that are running loose in Washington today.'⁴⁴

Hofstadter's letter to Knopf was indicative of his sense that whilst the American political system was sufficiently robust to repel the threat of McCarthyism, the academic community remained vulnerable. His next published work was an attempt to provide historical perspective on 'one of the central issues of our time.'⁴⁵ The study, a collaboration between Hofstadter and Walter Metzger and entitled *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, was part of the wider American Academic Freedom Project at Columbia. The project, the first national study of academic freedom and its relationship to wider society, had been proposed and financed by Louis Rabinowitz, a New York philanthropist and long-term benefactor of Yale University. The executive committee made up of Columbia academics, including Hofstadter, was joined by a panel of advisers from universities, seminaries and libraries across the country.

Hofstadter's study, that of the pre-history of the concept of academic freedom, commenced by considering scholarly life in Europe's earliest centres of learning. The unity of Christendom had ensured an environment that, although it could not be described as one that encouraged humanistic learning, was not utterly repressive. However, the febrile atmosphere of the Reformation and the subsequent Counter-Reformation ensured intellectual freedom made little advance for more than two centuries. It was as modern society began to take shape, that the concept of academic

⁴⁴ Hofstadter to Pat Knopf, March 4, 1954, Knopf Papers Box 170.

⁴⁵ Hofstadter and Walter Metzger, *Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), v.

freedom slowly emerged as an amalgam of related ideas. Science provided the blueprint for free enquiry driven by the search for new truths, commerce the principle of free competition, and democratic politics the ideas of free speech and the plurality of opinion. However, in America, it was the battle for religious tolerance that 'cleared the ground for it by eliminating or moderating its most formidable obstacles.'⁴⁶

The strength and importance of religious theology within American society began to weaken in the eighteenth century as fractures began to appear within the dominant theology of Calvinism. The result, according to Hofstadter, was more than a simple broadening of theology. More importantly, it led to increased liberality within religion. However, the shifts in the religious life of the nation could not be understood without a consideration of broader societal changes. The growth of commerce and the resultant increase in wealth provided the means and encouraged the desire for intellectual pursuits that fell outside the domain of religion. The middle-class passion for science and the appetite for the Enlightenment ideas coming out of Europe served to lessen the dominant position that religion had previously held. This changing intellectual landscape was reflected within the colleges and it was inevitable that these new ideas would shine a light on the significant restrictions to intellectual freedom. There was neither a revolt nor public demands for academic freedom, but 'a new degree of latitude seems very slowly to have developed even in the absence of any...formal rationale.'⁴⁷ The advance of freedom was both quiet and gradual, but importantly, 'the intellectual changes resulting from the development of the Enlightenment...came about almost completely without incident.'⁴⁸

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw an unfortunate reversal of the progress that had been made. The reaction against the Enlightenment was of pivotal importance, but it was the proliferation of new colleges, once again dominated by sectarian concerns, that determined the degree of the regression. The success of the colonial colleges had owed much to their ability to free themselves from such concerns and to actively engage

⁴⁶ Ibid., 61,62.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 197.

with secular thought. Almost universally, these new institutions set themselves in opposition to secularism, their role instead being to defend spiritual values and ensure piety. Consequently, they 'neither aspired to nor pretended to foster academic freedom,' and had seemingly little regard for academic achievement.⁴⁹ The cultural conditions that encouraged the growth of the colleges, primarily the revivalism of the period, increased fundamentalism and what Hofstadter described as 'the unchecked ragings of the denominational spirit,' had a deleterious effect throughout the higher education system.⁵⁰

Despite the challenges, civil and religious liberty were generally accepted principles by the time the country descended into Civil War. Together, these liberties provided the basis for a concept of academic freedom, but it was a concept that was only fully formulated in the post-bellum period. The slavery issue itself bore witness to the lack of freedom and the dangers thereof. Hofstadter wrote of the intellectual paralysis in the South due to the intolerance and repression of dissenting voices and the inability of Northern academics to advance their contribution beyond simple agitation on a moral or ideological level. The absence of forums for the free discussion of the issues and of institutions capable of providing analysis and solutions, was not necessarily instrumental in the crisis. However, 'it was symptomatic of a more general state of mind that ultimately led to disaster.' As Hofstadter warned, in a clear reference to McCarthy, 'societies that imagine themselves unable to meet the costs of free discussion are likely to be presented with a much more exorbitant bill.' Academic freedom had been a very recent gain, one that was essential for those who dedicated their life to ideas. More importantly, it was essential to the health of the nation as a whole.⁵¹

The general tone of the book caused Curti to write Hofstadter to express his concerns at the lack of militancy. The letter prompted an unusually prickly response from Hofstadter. 'I feel hard put to understand how anyone who had read the ms carefully,' he replied, 'could fail to see the articulate bias on the side of freedom that pervades these

⁴⁹ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 211.

⁵¹ Ibid., 261.

chapters.⁵² To Curti's mind, Hofstadter's assessment of the pernicious influence of popular democracy on academic freedom, particularly when considered alongside his work on the reform movements, was reflective of the new conservatism. In his defence Hofstadter charged Curti with confusing the values of freedom and popular democracy. Hofstadter felt that the book had made clear that 'freedom is our central value,' but that it was undeniable that the 'populace has often failed to have a very respectful understanding of the need for intellectual freedom.' In a direct reference to the Progressive historians he added that 'people like Parrington have always been so reluctant to admit' this.⁵³

Hofstadter also responded directly to the charge of neo-conservatism. Whilst he did not accept that it had any influence on his thinking he did, in a 'confession of faith', accept that he had become more conservative. However, this had more to do with the changing political climate than with any personal conversion to political conservatism. He maintained, 'I have not given up any significant portion of the human values I had 20 years ago when I was more "radical."' As he set out in his lecture at Barnard College, the legacy of the New Deal, and the present threat to its achievements, had led him and many others to reconsider their relationship to radicalism. However, as he reminded Curti, he had remained a staunch opponent of the Eisenhower campaign for the presidency. In his concluding statement he spoke for many of his fellow liberal intellectuals when he wrote of Stevenson, 'I'll be content to let him stand as my measure of conservatism, the kind I care for.'⁵⁴

Hofstadter's work on academic freedom, coupled with his study of the radical right, led to him being approached by the Fund for the Republic to prepare a memorandum and provide consulting services. The Fund, established by the Ford Foundation in 1952, had been created to provide grants for research programs that addressed the issues of civil liberties, religious liberty and academic freedom. In December 1957 the Fund requested that Hofstadter set forth his view on the significance of extremist groups in American

⁵² Hofstadter to Curti, December, 1953. MCP

⁵³ Hofstadter to Curti, December, 1953.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

society.⁵⁵ Over the following months Hofstadter drafted his response on the subject and submitted a confidential memorandum to the Fund in the Fall of the following year. His characterization of the movement was by his own account 'very pejorative' and controversial beyond the point that he felt comfortable in making it public. As his letter to Pat Knopf had indicated, Hofstadter was clearly fearful of attracting the unwanted attention of the extremist mob. The memorandum was to be a 'communication, politically speaking among friends.'⁵⁶

Hofstadter explained that he had been attracted to the study of the pseudo-conservatives due to his affectionate interest in the history of 'American crankiness', an interest which was naturally piqued by the rise of McCarthyism. However, it was the radical right's self-identification as conservatives, which seemed at odds with their disregard for accepted political norms, that Hofstadter felt demanded serious evaluation. Coinciding as it did with his study of the reform movements of the past, he concluded that the historical evidence belied the idea of a linear political spectrum. The range of political opinions were better considered within a circle, the extremes on the left and right being side by side rather than at opposite poles. Such political groups shared a 'common radical alienation from the main working institutions of the country.' Hofstadter accepted that his published essay on pseudo-conservatism had not made clear his reservations about Adorno's analysis, particularly his own contention that the authoritarian personality was found in equal measure on the political left. It was this, Hofstadter suggested, that explained the presence of former Marxists amongst the outstanding spokesmen of the radical right.⁵⁷

As with the lecture at Barnard, Hofstadter did not seek to dismiss what he felt were the very real concerns that gave rise to the radical right. Indeed, he went further than he had publicly when he explained that 'far from assuming...that the extreme right is quite wrong on everything, I believe that in some sense the extreme right is (except in its wildest moments) almost partially right on everything.' He pushed the point further

⁵⁵ The Fund for the Republic to Hofstadter, December 9, 1957, RHP Box 24.

⁵⁶ Hofstadter, "The Contemporary Extreme Right in the United States: A Memorandum," RHP, SUNY Box 1, Folder 16, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

when he admitted that 'on a few things I am quite prepared to entertain the notion that it is almost entirely right.'⁵⁸ However, the purpose of the memorandum was not to assess their politics in terms of right and wrong but rather to discuss their mentality and the techniques that they used. It was their political style that posed the greatest danger to the political health of the nation.

Hofstadter's analysis of the pattern of support for McCarthy showed education to be the single greatest factor. The archetypal right-wing supporter was poorly educated, of low or middle income, living outside the Northeast and Middle Atlantic States and having grandparents born in Europe. Yet despite a degree of homogeneity amongst the mass of support, it was also the case that the leadership was divided. As Hofstadter suggested, 'their divisions are more impressive than their unity.' There was a coterie of right-wing intellectuals, many of whom were converts from Communism, who represented the respectable side of the radical right. However, this group was outnumbered considerably by the 'unmitigated cranks' who gave the movement its distinctive character and style. Whilst the contrast between the two factions was clear, Hofstadter identified a remarkable convergence of ideas beneath the contrasting facades. They were united by their opposition to Communism, internationalism and big government and, after 1954, a growing sense of resentment at increased calls for desegregation. Whilst the importance of Communism as the single most important theme would seem indisputable, Hofstadter doubted its position as the central motive of their dissent. He contended that 'it is not the essence of their cause; it is, rather, their most effective weapon.'⁵⁹

The strength of 'the ephemeral popular will' was a distinctive characteristic of American democracy, and history had shown that the nation's institutional structure was insufficiently robust to contain the popular spirit when it turned sour. Whilst Hofstadter accepted that there was much to be valued in the strength of the popular spirit of the American people, he felt 'its costs have been ignored.' The inherent suspicion of authority, which was a foundation of American democracy, had also

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 14, 15, 18.

provided the basis for periodic outbursts of prejudice and nativism. McCarthy manipulated existing feelings of distrust and provided a focus for the resentment in the privileged and well educated who held power in the nation. Central to McCarthy's crusade was the assertion that the normal American was the victim of a widespread conspiracy amongst the elite. Although Hofstadter claimed to wish to avoid clinical terminology, he suggested that 'the right-wing sense of persecution is so active that a great deal of the...literature seems paranoid.' The vision of history as a moral drama, a battle of good and evil that pitted the people against the ruling classes had much in common with the Populist movement and shared the sense of impending catastrophe at the hands of the wicked few. At root, both movements were prompted by the uncertainty of a changing society and fuelled by a desire to return to an imaginary past. McCarthyism was simply the most recent revolt against modernity.⁶⁰

Hofstadter dismissed the association of the radical right with fascism, an interpretation that had become common amongst those on the left in the wake of Adorno's study. The overriding distrust of authority displayed was inconsistent with the fascist mentality. Furthermore, this distrust was incompatible with the radical right's own assertion that they were conservative. It was evident to Hofstadter that the radical right did not derive its strength from conservative ideology but rather from the peculiarities of American popular democracy. Their intense alienation from American life, shared with those on the extreme left, meant their concern was not with the preservation of the existing system but, as Hofstadter suggested, its destruction. In the pursuit of their aims there was no place for compromise and this absolutism placed them 'outside the frame of normal democratic politics.' They were not only removed from genuine conservatism but from the accepted norms of a democratic society.⁶¹

Hofstadter concluded by turning to the issue of how to deal with the radical right, and the inevitability of future uprisings of extremist sentiment. He called for 'a strategy of encapsulation' in which those like McCarthy should be isolated from the more respectable elements of society, and that there be no compromise to the extremist

⁶⁰ Ibid., 23, 24, 44, 49.

⁶¹ Ibid., 78, 80, 84.

demands.⁶² It was a failure of leadership amongst McCarthy's enemies that had allowed the extreme right to establish a foothold at a national level. American politicians lacked the confidence and moral strength to close ranks as soon as McCarthy reared his head. As a result, his power increased, the damage to the political life of the nation was magnified and the task of halting the forces that had been unleashed became progressively more difficult. The greatest lesson to be learned was that whilst the democratic ethos must be respected, it did not mean that political leaders should 'take their cues from the cranky minorities or from the uninformed, aberrant and ephemeral gusts of the public mood.'⁶³ The evidence suggested that a movement built on outrage and indignation with little support amongst those who were politically literate was unlikely to ever establish itself in government. Nevertheless, as McCarthy had shown, if such movement were left unchecked, they had the capacity to ensure that those who did govern were restricted from doing so effectively.

Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, published in 1963, was a continuation of the work that had occupied him for the best part of the decade. The book, perhaps more than any other, was as much a statement on the present as a reflection on the past. As he wrote in his opening lines, 'Although this book deals mainly with certain aspects of the remoter past, it was conceived in response to the political and intellectual contradictions of the 1950s.' Whilst Hofstadter was mindful to accept that McCarthy's central concern had not been with the intellectuals and that his targets were generally men of greater public importance, they nevertheless found themselves in the line of fire. Indeed, 'it seemed to give special rejoicing to his followers when they were hit.' The extremist rhetoric of McCarthy had created an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism that had been all-pervasive, most clearly reflected in the presidential campaign of 1952 and the crushing defeat of Stevenson. The painful evidence of the strength of McCarthy's influence suggested there was a widespread and virulent threat to intellect and 'aroused the fear that the critical mind was at a ruinous discontent.'⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 90.

⁶³ Ibid., 98.

⁶⁴ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 3.

As Hofstadter had admitted, by the time of the publication of *Anti-Intellectualism*, things had changed. Whilst 'yesterday intellectuals were being scrutinised by Congressmen and vigilantes for signs of heresy or even treason; today the government swarms with Harvard professors and ex-Rhodes scholars.'⁶⁵ The Kennedy presidency had seen a newfound respect for intellect and the president had surrounded himself with men from the intellectual community. Nevertheless, Hofstadter felt certain that the suspension of hostility was likely to be temporary as American democracy, by its very nature, contained elements of anti-intellectualism that would continue to persist. As he insisted, 'Our anti-intellectualism is, in fact, older than our national identity.'⁶⁶ On the whole this anti-intellectualism was benign but also broadly diffused, fostered by the democratic and egalitarian sentiments that had dominated American religion, politics and education. Anti-intellectualism was, therefore, often an incidental consequence of good intentions, a fact that made it all the more difficult to counteract. Hofstadter suggested that anti-intellectualism be 'excised from the benevolent impulses upon which it lives by constant and delicate acts of intellectual surgery which spare these impulses themselves.'⁶⁷ By drawing attention to the deep roots of anti-intellectualism within the main pillars of American society, Hofstadter hoped to make the first incision.

Before he addressed the long history of anti-intellectual sentiment, Hofstadter set out his definition of the intellectual. As he had in "Democracy and Anti-Intellectualism", his first examination of the place of intellect in American society published a decade earlier, Hofstadter emphasized the essential balance of piety and playfulness. The commitment to ideas that was central to the intellectual life required a counterpoise lest it become self-constricting or rigidly applied to a singular idea. He also restated his position regarding the intellectual's perceived relationship with truth. Whilst the pursuit of truth must be a central goal, experience had taught that a truth possessed gives only fleeting satisfaction. He summed up his sense of the contingency of truth when he declared, 'Truth captured loses its glamor, truths long known and widely believed have a way of turning false with time; easy truths are a bore, and too many of them become half-

⁶⁵ Hofstadter, "A Note on Intellect and Power, review of *The Servants of Power* by Loren Baritz," *The American Scholar*, 30 (Autumn, 1961), 588.

⁶⁶ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

truths.’ It was the pursuit which was of central importance and the perpetual ‘quest for new uncertainties’ provided a reward that the transient nature of truth could not.⁶⁸

The public’s vision of the intellectual was to a large degree determined by their visibility and, therefore, it was their role as that of expert or ideologue that was of primary significance. In both these guises, the intellectual evoked a degree of fear and resentment which Hofstadter accepted was to some extent legitimate. The sense of helplessness and worries of manipulation and subversion were responses to the ‘grave psychic stresses that have come with modernity’ and the intellectuals appeared to represent all that was to be feared.⁶⁹ Whilst the expert threatened the power of the people to determine their own futures, it was the intellectual-as-ideologue who had become the greatest foe of the people. Historically, the American intellectual had been committed to the political causes of liberalism, progressivism or radicalism, and whilst the public had shared in the spirit of protest there had been little animosity. However, the fact that a significant number of intellectuals had been Communists or fellow-travellers in the 1930’s had created a breach and handed the anti-intellectuals their greatest weapon, the charge of disloyalty. Furthermore, ‘the sense of shame over past credulity and of guilt over past political involvement induced...a kind of paralysis that caused them to be helpless’ in the face of McCarthy.⁷⁰ When the intellectual community had needed to stand strong against the forces of reaction, it had lacked the necessary resolve.

Despite Communism having been reduced to a negligible influence in American politics by the 1950’s, McCarthy found it to be a suitable scapegoat. The real function of what Hofstadter described as the “Great Inquisition” was not to prevent espionage or to find actual Communists but to ‘discharge resentments and frustrations, to punish, to satisfy enmities whose roots lay elsewhere.’⁷¹ Communism was not the target, but it did provide a powerful weapon with which to launch an assault on the New Deal and the principles for which it stood. McCarthy capitalised on the long-standing rumblings of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 40.

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

discontent with modern society that existed in the American heartland, and which had greatly increased under almost twenty years of liberal administrations. The intellectuals, with their past links to Communism and association with the New Deal, were a ready target. In addition, the existence of an established mythology of the intellectual as enemy of the people meant they were an extremely popular one. The remaining chapters of *Anti-Intellectualism* were concerned with plotting how this 'mythology has grown and perpetuated and expressed itself in the United States.'⁷²

Hofstadter began his historical survey by declaring the American mind to have been shaped 'in the mold of early modern Protestantism,' and just as it proved central to the intellectual life of the nation it also provided the impetus for anti-intellectualism. The primacy of the practical, the disdain for ideas, and the success of leaders able to manipulate the emotions of the people at the expense of men of learning were not new impulses but rather 'inheritances from American Protestantism.'⁷³ The struggle between intellect and emotion, which was a feature common to most Christian communities, played out in an uncharacteristically one-sided manner within the American context. The Puritans had managed to balance the dual aspects of the Protestant faith, 'the conflict between reason and intuition, between the head and the heart, between realism and idealism.'⁷⁴ However, the peculiarities of early American society, the arrival of large numbers of Europe's disaffected and the rapid expansion westward ensured that the Protestantism that would come to dominate would be one less respectful of the need for balance. For those who felt themselves fortunate to have freed themselves from the tyranny of established institutions there was little desire to bow to authority in matters of faith. Furthermore, the lack of education of many of those who had arrived inevitably led them to favour a religion that stressed the personal relationship to God and the virtue of religious experience as opposed to theological discourse.

⁷² Ibid., 45.

⁷³ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform : An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*, *Chicago History of American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.

It was in the revivalism of mid-eighteenth century that Hofstadter saw the origins of the anti-intellectualism that he believed would become pervasive in American Protestantism. Hofstadter credited the evangelists with 'quicken[ing] the democratic spirit in America,' through their preaching of a gospel that was available to all. However, these same men 'quicken[ed] anti-intellectualism; and they gave to American anti-intellectualism its first brief moment of militant success.'⁷⁵ The beginning of the twentieth century saw the evangelical movement battling the combined forces of modernism. Their response was a synthesis of fundamentalist religion and fundamentalist Americanism, the 'one-hundred per cent mentality.' It is at this point that Hofstadter widened the charge against evangelical Protestantism. The involvement of religious men in the Ku Klux Klan, Prohibition, the Scopes Trial and the campaign against Al Smith evidenced the link between fundamentalist religion and 'the generally prejudiced mind.' The Scopes Trial was central for Hofstadter in understanding the widening of the assault by fundamentalist religion on modernism. William Jennings Bryan combined 'the two basic ancestral pieties of the people – evangelical faith and populist democracy.' The debate over evolution was fundamentalism's last stand against the forces of secularism and modernism. In defeat, the anti-intellectualism that had coloured the debate would mutate into something more dangerous. The Manichean mind of the fundamentalist, the moral absolutism and distaste for compromise, would lead him to become a 'significant component in the extreme right of American politics.' Whilst defeated in its religious objectives, fundamentalism had 'found a new kind of force and a new punitive capacity.'⁷⁶

Hofstadter was not the first to make the connection between religious views and political extremism. Although not explicitly referenced, the work of Seymour Martin Lipset, a Columbia colleague, had drawn direct parallels between political extremism and working-class religion.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the association of fundamentalism with the prejudices of right-wing extremism was a step too far for C. Vann Woodward who, after

⁷⁵ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 118, 133, 127, 134.

⁷⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Democracy and Working-Class Authoritarianism," *American Sociological Review*, 24 (1959), 482-501; "Three Decades of the Radical Right," in Daniel Bell (ed), *The Radical Right*, 373-446.

reading a draft, counselled, 'Dick, you just can't do this.' He had been convinced by the association with anti-intellectualism but felt 'No amount of Adorno, Stouffe, Hartley, etc. will sustain' the charge of quasi-fascism.⁷⁸ It is not clear whether Woodward's admonishment led Hofstadter to alter the text, but the published version made clear that Hofstadter's target was a mutated form of religious fundamentalism. This politicised fundamentalism manifested itself in a 'type of pseudo-political mentality' that appeared incomprehensible to most within the mainstream of American politics. Hofstadter contended that their incredulity was a result of a failure to comprehend the religious roots. In his opinion, the radical right was best understood against 'the historical background of the revivalist preacher and the camp meeting.' To this 'fundamentalist type' the world was simply understood as an arena in which the battle between absolute good and evil was perpetually waged. Political issues were shorn of any relationship to actuality and interpreted as nothing more than an illustration of this 'infinitely greater reality.' This 'absurd nonsense' lacked any sense of ambiguity and shunned the balance and circumspection which Hofstadter had come to accept as essential to the stability of the political system.⁷⁹

The fact that the framers of the Constitution had been men of learning was not an automatic guarantee of respect for intellect in American political life. The nation's egalitarian roots had ensured that from its earliest days there was a degree of unwillingness to allow politics to become the responsibility of an educated elite. Hofstadter described how as 'popular democracy gained strength and confidence, it reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati.'⁸⁰ This widespread belief in the primacy of the wisdom of the common man provided the basis for the inevitable defeat of intellect in the political realm and the result was withdrawal of intellectuals from party politics.

⁷⁸ C. Vann Woodward to Hofstadter, May 11, 1962, in Michael O'Brien (ed.) *The Letters of C. Vann Woodward*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2013), 227

⁷⁹ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 134.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

The Progressive era saw American intellectuals re-engage with their society and society welcomed their return. The growth of industrialism and the power of the economic interests in society meant that governance had become a more complex business. The intellectuals were now required as the servants of change and the isolation of the university from the outside world, and the separation of knowledge and power came to an end. This was, Hofstadter suggested, Progressivism's greatest success. Whilst there had been some political achievements, it was the inclusion of intellectuals within the political discourse which would prove to be the most important legacy.⁸¹ However, the Progressive era came to a shuddering to a halt as the nation came to terms with World War One. The almost unanimous support amongst intellectuals for Woodrow Wilson meant that they were destined to become victims of the reaction against the President. The public turned on the intellectuals, who had shown themselves to be 'prophets of false and needless reform, as architects of the administrative state, as supporters of the war, even as ur-Bolsheviks.' The intellectuals, in turn, reacted against the public, proclaiming them to be 'a nation of boobs, Babbitts and fanatics.'⁸² The disillusionment and sense of absolute alienation led some to leave America in the hope of finding a more congenial home, one in which intellect was nurtured and respected rather than pilloried. Those who remained retreated once more from public life.

The aftermath of the Depression and the renewed period of reform inaugurated by the New Deal administration saw the exiles return and a new period of harmony and cooperation between the public, the government and the intellectual. After a decade of detachment, there was a remarkable turnaround as 'the New Deal brought the force of mind into closer relation with power than it had been...since the days of the Founding Fathers.'⁸³ Large numbers of academics played an essential role in drafting legislation in the critical early period of Roosevelt's tenure. For opponents of the reform agenda, the negative influence of intellectuals was both undeniable and unwanted, yet the general public seemed content, at least for a time, that the expert was a valuable servant of the people. However, the spirit of anti-intellectualism reappeared with renewed vigour in

⁸¹ Ibid., 205.

⁸² Ibid., 213.

⁸³ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 214.

the years after World War Two. Just as had been the case after World War One, intellectuals suffered as a result of the revulsion of the public. The 1952 election, the barometer of the public perception of the intellectual, saw Adlai Stevenson become 'the victim of the accumulated grievances against intellectuals and the brain trusters which had festered the right wing since 1933.'⁸⁴

Hofstadter concluded his study of the history of anti-intellectualism of the political realm with a brief comment on John F. Kennedy. During both his campaign and the early days of his presidency he had made clear his respect for culture and intellect. Yet Hofstadter betrayed a certain cynicism as he noted that this outward show of respect could merely be a recognition by Kennedy of the intellectuals as an important interest group in American politics. Nevertheless, it was undeniable, and of the utmost importance, that he had early identified the need for talent and intelligence amongst his advisers. The intellectual-as-expert was now an established requirement for government, and irrespective of the wider position of intellect in society this role appeared to be one that was constantly growing in importance. In Hofstadter's eyes this relationship could do nothing but benefit both Kennedy and the nation as a whole. However, the impact that the association with power would have on the intellectual, which he would address in his final chapter, was a more complex one.

In his most wide-ranging section of the book, Hofstadter assessed the impact of the cult of practicality. Hofstadter suggested that whilst 'practical vigor is a virtue; what has been spiritually crippling in our history is the tendency to make a mystique of practicality.'⁸⁵ As had been the case in American religion, both business and farming had, in their earliest stages, contained elements that were favourable to the intellect. In the world of business, the 'old-fashioned merchant...was a versatile and often a cosmopolitan man,' someone who was educated and politically involved and who married both intellectualism and business acumen.⁸⁶ However, the changing nature of American business meant that 'as the mercantile ideal declined, it was replaced by the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 245.

ideal of the self-made man.’⁸⁷ This ideal had at its core an element of anti-intellectualism. In what Hofstadter described as the ‘cult of experience’, formal education was seen to be a negative force which made men lazy and served only to heighten their desire for ‘elegant leisure’.⁸⁸ This firm belief in the primacy of practical experience over learned knowledge was also reflected in farming, and the deep-seated hostility to theory was a serious impediment to the modernization of agriculture.⁸⁹ Whilst the attitudes to formal learning would soften at the beginning of the twentieth century, the focus remained firmly on vocational education.

Hofstadter’s final study of the primacy of practical endeavour over that of the mind was in the history of radicalism in America. Whilst intellectuals were accepted for their expertise, they were made acutely aware that their learning was no substitute for the practical experience of the workers and the union organisers.⁹⁰ It was in the Communist Party that the denigration of intellect was most apparent. Hofstadter suggested that ‘the Communist view of the intellectual’s function brought forth certain ironic variations on the themes of practicality, masculinity, and primitivism that run through the national code at large.’⁹¹ The task of the communist was an essentially practical one: to bring about revolution. The centrality of the revolution meant that intellect was only useful in its ability to further the cause and to assist in quickening the pace of change. Much to intellect’s detriment, many had been willing to sacrifice their role as independent critics to the aims of the party. However, the essential incompatibility of intellect and political dogmatism meant that the split between the intellectuals and the party had been inevitable.

In a reprise of his previous work on higher education, Hofstadter summarised the anti-intellectualism that had suffused the whole education system. As Hofstadter complained, ‘belief in mass education was not founded primarily upon a passion for the development of the mind, or upon pride in learning...but rather upon the supposed

⁸⁷ Ibid., 253.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 258.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 282.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁹¹ Ibid., 293.

political and economic benefits of education.’⁹² Practicality and utility had been the watchwords and serious learning had suffered at the hands of the democratic ethos. In his notes to the chapter he had written that the most pervasive theme in educational writing was ‘that education and democracy are somehow intimately bound up with each other.’ He was in no doubt that this was true, as he had been at pains to point out. However, there remained a ‘persistent indifference to the possibility that in this, as in other forms of intimacy, there may also a tension and antagonism.’⁹³ His purpose, as with all of his writing on education, was to bring attention to these conflicts.

Hofstadter detailed what he saw as the steady wane of ‘intellectually serious’ education in the years following World War I, which culminated in high school curriculum reforms of the life-adjustment movement of the 1940s and 1950s. The shift in focus towards the needs of the majority of students who were unlikely to pursue further study was, according to Hofstadter, ‘an attempt on the part of the educational leaders and the United States Office of Education to make completely dominant the values of the crusade against intellectualism.’⁹⁴ The aim of the life-adjustment movement was to provide America’s youth with an education that would equip them with the skills, to ‘live democratically with satisfaction to themselves and profit to society as home members, workers, and citizens.’⁹⁵ As well as a belief in the positive value of utilitarian education, Hofstadter identified a negative premise behind the movement. The belief that the majority of America’s young, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, were incapable of developing an understanding of intellectual matters did much to inform their policies. In the spirit of democracy, the needs of the majority were uppermost in the educationalists’ minds. The needs of society, rather than those of the child, became paramount and intellect, once again, found itself at odds with American society at large.

Hofstadter concluded by reflecting on the contemporary situation of the intellectual in American society, particularly the intellectuals’ own perception of their position. Their new acceptance had divided the intellectual community, with some, particularly the

⁹² Ibid., 305.

⁹³ “Notes on Reading”, Hofstadter Papers, SUNY Buffalo, Box 2, Folder 5.

⁹⁴ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 343.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 343.

younger generation, wary of a suspected loss of independence and determined to retain a sense of alienation. Modern intellectual life across the western world had been characterized by a reaction against bourgeois society, and this had been particularly strong in America. So much so, that alienation became 'orthodox, axiomatic, and traditional' to the degree that accommodation with power or acceptance of society appeared utterly repellent.⁹⁶ It was with the concept of alienation as a fixed position that Hofstadter took issue. His short sojourn as a student in the Communist Party had confirmed his distaste for the rigidity of thought that accompanied blind dedication to a specific ideology and led to a life-long opposition to dogmatism. For many of those who had experienced, and played important roles, in the ideological debates of the 1930's, the era of ideology, and that of alienation, had passed.

Hofstadter called for neither complete acceptance nor rejection of alienation as an intellectual stance. The historical record showed intellectual life to be altogether more complex. The appreciation of complexity had come with the experience of having lived through an era in which alienation became a moral imperative. Hofstadter's generation had, at first, acted in accordance with this imperative but 'feeling they had been misled by it...find it no longer binding.' To those who criticised the perceived dereliction of intellectual duty he countered by insisting that they 'have earned their release by more than two decades of disillusioning experience.'⁹⁷ The wisdom of experience had taught Hofstadter that the choice of moral position was not a simple one. It was also a personal one determined by both individual character and circumstance. Most importantly, despite its faults of which Hofstadter admitted there were many, America was a nation that afforded this choice. It was, therefore, imperative that the intellectual community itself did not become divided into hostile and competing factions. Intellect only flourished when it spoke in a plurality of voices and it was essential to the intellectual health of the nation that these disparate voices were engaged in a shared conversation.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 399.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 417.

As he was finishing *Anti-Intellectualism*, Hofstadter reflected that writing it 'had been difficult but also a pleasure in a way that others weren't quite.'⁹⁸ The work, which he described as 'largely a personal book,' secured him a second Pulitzer Prize, but it has also been criticised as a distorted reading of the American past through the lens of the personal anguish of the McCarthy years.⁹⁹ In their otherwise laudatory survey of Hofstadter's career, Elkins and McKittrick marked the book as 'one of the less fortunate by-products' of his desire to engage with the recent past and one flawed by 'the very present-mindedness Hofstadter thought he was warning against.'¹⁰⁰ Yet given the fact that his work had always been implicitly or explicitly topical and prompted by present concerns, the charge seems somewhat unjustified. It is perhaps the sense that, unlike previous works, Hofstadter had appeared to be uncharacteristically out of step with the time that has led to greater scrutiny. The position of intellect seemed relatively secure at the time of publication. As Daniel Boorstin suggested, 'The Truth is, the American intellectual today cannot discover where he belongs precisely because he belongs everywhere.'¹⁰¹ Whilst the assessment that *Anti-Intellectualism* was out of kilter with the reality of the intellectuals' position is one that has prevailed, it is evident from the contemporary criticism that this was not deemed to be its predominant failing. As Hofstadter had shown, the rapprochements between society and the intellectual were invariably short-lived. Few critics doubted that he had been successful in establishing that anti-intellectualism was a central fact of the American national experience.

The primary criticism of the work was Hofstadter's failure to adequately define anti-intellectualism which, in turn, led to a series of separate histories which described certain impulses but were integrated only by the author's inference.¹⁰² The book had, according to Philip Gleason, treated anti-intellectualism 'as a thing which has objective reality' rather than as a conceptual instrument with which to analyse. In doing so,

⁹⁸ Hofstadter to Harvey Swados, June 3, 1962, HSP

⁹⁹ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, vii.

¹⁰⁰ Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKittrick, *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York.: Knopf, 1974), 336.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Boorstin, "The Split-Level Tower", *The Saturday Review*, June 1, 1963, 20.

¹⁰² Rush Welter, review of *Review of Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, by Richard Hofstadter, *The Journal of American History*, 51 (1964), 482-83; Arthur Bestor, "Review of Anti-Intellectualism in American Life", *The American Historical Review*, 70 (July, 1965) 1118-1120.

Hofstadter was guilty of reifying the concept and losing the subtlety with which he had discussed the concept in the opening chapters.¹⁰³ This was not a new criticism for Hofstadter, as his close friend Peter Gay had made similar remarks when reading a draft of the work. As Gay put it, 'Let me state the question baldly; to what extent is your piece an a priori construction.' He added that Hofstadter needed to ground his argument, with which Gay agreed, in proof, and not simply 'the proof of the essayist – presenting a convincing image to which the reader assents.'¹⁰⁴ Clearly from the initial reviews, whilst the work was considered a remarkable feat of writing, its thesis was not wholly convincing.

Hofstadter himself had not been without concerns over the success of his study. In a letter to Eric McKittrick, prior to completion, he ruefully admitted that 'it will be the first time I will ever turn a ms to the publisher with the sense of having written a failure.'¹⁰⁵ It was an opinion not shared by Alfred Knopf, who felt it an excellent work of historical criticism and praised Hofstadter for succeeding 'as so few critics do, in fulfilling his thoughts.'¹⁰⁶ Similar praise was received from his colleagues and friends, several of whom declared it his best work.¹⁰⁷ Yet Hofstadter remained unconvinced. He readily accepted Gleason's critical remarks as both 'entirely unexceptional and most welcome' and wrote that he felt the chief value of the work was not his overarching thesis, which he had failed to establish successfully, but rather the light he had managed to shed on several of the individual subjects. In hindsight, the subject, he concluded, had been an impossible one.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Philip Gleason, "Anti-Intellectualism and Other Reconsiderations - 1. Richard Hofstadter: *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* - 2. Frederick Merk: *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History; A Reinterpretation* - 3. H. Wayne Morgan (Ed.): *The Gilded Age; A Reappraisal*," *The Review of Politics*, 28 (April 1966), 241.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Gay to Hofstadter, undated [1962], RHP Box 3 Uncatalogued Correspondence

¹⁰⁵ Hofstadter to Eric McKittrick, undated, Eric McKittrick Papers, Box 29.

¹⁰⁶ Alfred Knopf to Hofstadter, May 8, 1963, RHP Box 21.

¹⁰⁷ David Donald to Hofstadter, June 10, 1963; C. Vann Woodward to Hofstadter, August 15, 1963, both RHP Box 21; Paul Carter to Hofstadter, September 27, 1963, RHP Box 1 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

¹⁰⁸ Hofstadter to Philip Gleason, April 26, 1953, RHP Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence

6

A Nation Slouching Onwards: The Turbulent Sixties

Whilst *Anti-Intellectualism* has been criticised as being uncharacteristically out of tune with the reality of contemporary America, the publication, just two years later, of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* placed Hofstadter firmly at the centre of the political debate. The contrast in impressions of the two works seems somewhat misleading given that they were, to a large extent, animated by the same concerns. Indeed both can be viewed as summations of the work Hofstadter had been engaged in since in the early 1950's. The renewed relevance of Hofstadter's work did not reflect a shift in his intellectual focus, but rather a changing political landscape that confirmed the validity of his long-standing concerns.

Whilst McCarthyism had undoubtedly been a malignant force in American politics and the impact of his crusade had been immensely damaging, Hofstadter had felt confident that pluralism would prevail. However, the success of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Republican primaries marked 'something new, very new, in our politics.' The stability of the American political system, Hofstadter wrote in *Partisan Review*, owed much to the fact that the major parties had not been founded along ideological lines. Instead, they were characterized by 'compromises among heterogeneous interests...led by men of much experience...in meeting the practical problems of state.' Goldwater rejected the need to appeal to a broad base of party members and to garner support through accommodation and dialogue. Instead, his success was built on his ability to arouse an extraordinary level of conviction from an extreme minority. The emotional intensity of this faction, motivated by 'social resentments' and 'economic greed' and inspired by Goldwater's 'messianic idealism', proved too powerful a force for the mainstream of the Republican Party to control.¹

¹ Hofstadter, "Some Comments on Senator Goldwater", *Partisan Review*, 31 (Fall 1964), 590-592.

In his original, unpublished introduction to *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter had bemoaned the fact that the two major parties showed little variance in their political principles. However, the rise of the radical right had convinced him that sharp divisions along ideological lines was a cause for concern rather than a sign of political vitality. The two-party system, he noted, may appear 'dreary and unconstructive,' but it was in fact 'a highly sophisticated piece of apparatus, very appropriate to its vital function.' The task of the parties was to build coalitions that would bring together heterogeneous interests in a 'consensual ethos'. The gesture politics and illusory nature of political debate that he had found so distasteful twenty years earlier were now seen as an essential in the smooth operation of a stable political system. Political hypocrisy had become acceptable as 'in politics hypocrisy is a minor vice and a major virtue: its other name is tact.'²

As the election approached, Hofstadter, despite his concerns, remained sanguine about the prospect that Goldwater would be overwhelmingly rejected at the polls. However, he remained worried about the long-term consequences of Goldwater's hold over the Republican Party. Goldwater had 'brought about a realignment of the parties that will put the democratic process in the country at jeopardy.' Irrespective of the election result, Hofstadter feared that Goldwater's grip on the party would remain, the result of which threatened to move the country towards a 'kind of party-and-a-half system' in which the Democratic party was left to govern virtually unopposed. This was a clear threat to the political health of the nation. As he concluded his *Encounter* essay, 'it is now much easier to believe that America is visibly sick with a malady that may do all of us in.'³

The margin of Goldwater's defeat gave Hofstadter some solace. Lyndon B. Johnson won a landslide victory with over 60% of the popular vote, the largest share of the vote since the election of 1820. In a post-election essay in *Encounter*, Hofstadter suggested with

² Hofstadter, Draft introduction to *The American Political Tradition*, RHP, Box 3; "Goldwater & His Party: The True Believer and the Radical Right", *Encounter*, October 1964, 3,4,5.

³ Hofstadter, "Goldwater & His Party", 11, 3, 13; Hofstadter, "A Long View: Goldwater in History", *New York Review of Books*, October 8, 1964, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1964/10/08/a-long-view-goldwater-in-history/> accessed 05/06/18.

some optimism that ‘the malady so frighteningly displayed at San Francisco has been contained.’ Yet, he was careful to remind his readers that ‘we have not yet finished reckoning with what Goldwater represents.’ He was hopeful that the Cow Palace convention might come to be seen as the apogee of the strength of the radical right, but over a decade of research on the movement had made him wary of celebrating its demise. The Republican Party must still find a way back to a political position acceptable to ‘the American consensus.’⁴

The title essay of Hofstadter’s 1965 collection, *The Paranoid Style*, had originally been a lecture which he had delivered at Oxford University in November 1963 and published a year later in *Harpers*. However, the lecture was not the first time Hofstadter had used the term ‘paranoid style’. During his time as Pitt Professor at the University of Cambridge, he had appeared on the BBC Third Programme in a 1959 broadcast in which he delivered a talk entitled “The American Right Wing and the Paranoid Style”. The transcript of the broadcast shows it to be based on the confidential memorandum written a year earlier for the Fund for the Republic. As he had in the memorandum, he explained that his interest lay in ‘the style of thought behind which there lies a frame of mind.’ He qualified the use of the term ‘paranoid’ by insisting that whilst it was a psychiatric term, it had already passed into general usage, and it was in this sense that he applied it to the movements of the American right.⁵

In his 1959 talk he outlined the key characteristics which he would develop further in his 1963 lecture and subsequent published essay. Of central importance was the ‘tendency to dwell upon the failures of the past rather than work on programmatic proposals for the future.’ The distinguishing feature of these extreme right-wingers was that those past failures were seen as indisputable evidence of conspiracy. Indeed, they saw not only a history of conspiratorial acts but viewed the whole of history as ‘a conspiracy, or a series of conspiracies.’ Significantly, in 1959, at a safe distance from the peak of McCarthy’s influence yet prior to the rise of Goldwater, Hofstadter could

⁴ Hofstadter, “The Goldwater Debacle”, *Encounter*, January 1965, 66, 70.

⁵ Hofstadter, “BBC WAC, American Right Wing and the Paranoid Style, Richard Hofstadter, tx 02/08/59”, 5; Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, *Harpers*, November 1964.

confidently conclude that those on the extreme right were unlikely to become a governing force. Rather, 'they constitute, in a small way, a force in American politics and a problem for American policy-makers.' They were a political hindrance rather than a real political force.⁶

By the time Hofstadter gave his lecture at Oxford, and certainly by the time an abridged version was published in *Harpers*, the strength of the Goldwater movement was apparent. In "The Paranoid Style in American Politics", he attempted to place the extreme right in historical context. This style of mind had a long history, and, as he noted, was not solely the preserve of the right. He defended his use of 'paranoid style' as the only term that 'adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy' that he had in mind. Importantly, in separating it from its clinical definition, he saw its significance in the fact that it was a mode of expression exhibited by 'more or less normal people.' In his 1965 version of the essay, he further described the difference between the clinical paranoiac and the political style, as that of someone who felt the conspiracy to be directed against them singly as opposed to those who saw a conspiracy against a whole culture or way of life. Irrespective of the distinction, the term was undoubtedly pejorative, and Hofstadter made clear that 'the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good.' However, his concern was not with the political validity of their conspiratorial ideas, but with the manner in which such ideas were promulgated and subsequently accepted by various groups.⁷

Hofstadter charted the history of the paranoid style in American history from the Illuminati scare at the end of the 18th century through to the anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic movements of the 19th century. Whilst the enemy changed, the frame of mind was the same and its importance lay in the fact that it survived long after the initial outbursts of fear had subsided. The influence on popular democracy and party politics meant 'it became an enduring factor in American politics.' However, the contemporary right-wing, whilst inculcated with the same conspiratorial obsessions, was markedly

⁶ Ibid., 7, 10.

⁷ Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics", *Harpers*, November 1964, 77; Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style", in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 4.

different. The earlier movements had been driven by a desire to defend an established way of life which, although under threat, nevertheless continued to exist. The new right stood for a vision of America that was no longer available, and this served only to increase the sense of anger and betrayal. To their mind, the betrayal was not now the work of outsiders or foreigners, but rather a conspiracy at the very centre of the nation's power.⁸

In conclusion he speculated that such a mentality 'may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population.' Certain religious, social and national groups were more disposed to paranoid thought and certain historical circumstances more likely to prompt 'the release of such psychic energies.' The episodic waves, when analysed, suggested that it was often elicited by social conflict. As he had made clear in his 1958 memorandum, the roots of discontent were often both justified and understandable. However, the paranoid style reached the peak of its strength when there was a confrontation of interests which appeared to be completely irreconcilable, often when the demands of a particular social interest were so far outside the accepted bounds of the political consensus that they were excluded from the political process itself. The Goldwater movement was something of an exception in this respect. Nevertheless, his campaign had shown his politics to be characteristic of the paranoid opposition to the 'normal political processes of bargain and compromise.'⁹

The rise of the Goldwater necessitated that Hofstadter reconsider his earlier work on pseudo-conservatism, and *The Paranoid Style* contained two new essays in which he attempted to qualify his initial observations in light of recent events. Hofstadter confessed that his concentration on the issue of status politics, which had been the cornerstone of his original interpretation, had appeared to impose a unitary explanation on a subject that was decidedly complex. Whilst he continued to believe that the distinction between status and interest politics was fundamental, he now had 'mixed feelings' about his single-minded application of term. It had been applied too narrowly,

⁸ "The Paranoid Style" (1964), 78-81.

⁹ Ibid., 86.

and in attempting to define an impulse that he considered to be central to a particular expression of discontent, he accepted that a concentration on status had the effect of mistaking 'the part for the whole.' Yet he remained convinced that 'the present generation have a particularly urgent need for such an analytical instrument as status politics' as it served to mitigate against the 'excessive rationalism' of the previous generation. The concentration on economic motives as the sole explanation of political conflict was no longer adequate and an analysis of the contemporary right-wing provided ample evidence of the continued preference for the politics of grievance and resentment over rational material interest.¹⁰

Hofstadter viewed Goldwater's nomination as 'the triumphal moment of pseudo-conservatism in American politics,' but he accepted that his success was, in many ways, built on new foundations. The ethnic minority vote, which Hofstadter had suggested was central to McCarthy's rise, was no longer a factor as the Goldwater movement was predominantly built on the support of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were traditional Republicans. There was also a clear appeal to ultra-conservative economic individualism that had been absent in McCarthyism. Yet what Hofstadter described as the 'shreds and scraps of genuine conservatism' were deemed secondary to his extremism and appeal to 'the moral prejudices of the revolt against modernity,' the hallmark of pseudo-conservatism. The re-emergence of fundamentalism in politics, a subject he had discussed in *Anti-Intellectualism*, provided the emotional intensity of the movement and a level of commitment characteristic of those whose vision of the world was both Manichean and apocalyptic.¹¹

In a wider definition of status concerns, Hofstadter described the commitments to values other than material gain which 'are taken by the persons who share them to be ultimate moral goals.' The demand to have these commitments, cultural, racial, religious, or moral, valued by wider society, and reflected politically, were as significant as economic wealth. Status politics, therefore, 'does more to express emotions than to

¹⁰ Hofstadter, "Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited", in *The Paranoid Style*, 66, 86, 90.

¹¹ Hofstadter, "Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservatism", in *The Paranoid Style*, 93, 94, 118; "Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited", 67, 72, 75.

formulate policies,' and this was reflected in Goldwater's polemics. He sought not to provide programmatic solutions but to frame the nation's problems in terms of moral crisis. In this, Hofstadter judged, he showed himself to be fully aware of the value of status politics to the politically discontented. Whilst failing at the election meant there were no immediate practical results, Goldwater had come as close as any presidential candidate had ever come to 'subverting the whole pattern of our politics of coalition and consensus'. Hofstadter also remained convinced that the right wing was both a formidable and permanent force in American politics, its permanence guaranteed by the fact that 'the things upon which it feeds are also permanent.'¹²

Rick Perlstein, in his study of the rise of conservatism in the 1960s, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, accuses Hofstadter of being blind to the real changes that were happening in American society. 'Men like this did not detect the ground shifting beneath their feet,' writes Perlstein. 'They didn't notice that year by year, crisis by crisis, America was slowly becoming more divided than it was united.'¹³ The charge is, of course, based on the assumed relationship between Hofstadter and consensus history, and as such, fails to take account of what Hofstadter actually wrote. Indeed, Hofstadter had long been aware of the challenges to the established political order. In 1948, he had warned in *The American Political Tradition*, ostensibly an attack on the political consensus, that 'the traditional ground is shifting under our feet.' It is true that his view on the value of consensus politics changed over time, but it is equally important to note that it was an acute awareness of the threats, rather than blindness, that led him to his later position. Whilst Hofstadter may not have foreseen the long-term consequences of Goldwater's rise, he very much recognised that the period was one in which the political consensus was being sorely tested. It was, in fact, this recognition that was central to his work in the later years of his career.

¹² "Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited", 87, 91; "Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservatism", 102, 140.

¹³ Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), xi.

The increasing divisions in American society were at the forefront of Hofstadter's mind, and his interjections into the political debate at the time of Goldwater's nomination heralded a period of renewed political engagement. In the spring of 1965, he was offered the opportunity by Walter Johnson from the University of Chicago to be part of a group of historians who planned to join the final leg of a civil rights march between Selma and Montgomery. Hofstadter accepted, and on March 25th the historians joined with other public figures in taking their stand alongside the thousands of marchers that made their way to the Alabama state capitol to demand an end to discriminatory voting rules.¹⁴ At the final rally, Martin Luther King reflected on the enormity of the occasion: 'There never was a moment in American history more honorable and more inspiring than the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes.'¹⁵ The march was indeed a symbolic moment in the fight for civil rights and less than five months later, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In his annual address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King made it clear that he believed the legislation was a direct result of the march.¹⁶ Whilst C. Vann Woodward optimistically suggested the event marked the end of an era, Hofstadter informed a reporter that it was simply the beginning. Despite clear signs of progress, Hofstadter felt that voting rights were just part of the solution. A wider survey of society showed that, in fact, 'we haven't got very far.'¹⁷

Whilst liberal intellectuals found cause for cautious optimism about government action on the key domestic issue of civil rights, there was significantly less confidence in the direction of Johnson's foreign policy. Hofstadter's correspondence at the time reveals the depth of his personal anguish over the conflict in Vietnam. In a December 1965 letter, Hofstadter confided to Harvey Swados, 'I am terribly depressed about Vietnam,

¹⁴ Hofstadter was clearly irritated by the one of the other historians who, on seeing him, had remarked, "I'm surprised to see you here." Hofstadter to William Miller, April 7, 1965, RHP Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, [Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March](#), in *A Call to Conscience*, ed. Clayborn Carson and Kris Shepard, (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001)

¹⁶ King, Annual Report at the Ninth Annual Convention of SCLC, 11 August 1965, cited in "Selma to Montgomery March", <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/selma-montgomery-march>. Accessed 30/07/18.

¹⁷ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 169.

and I think we are heading for a terrible disaster over it.' However, he admitted to wishing to keep his judgments private and to resist setting aside his current work to write publicly on his concerns. He also suggested that thirty years of life as a historian had made him wary of casting judgement on a topic without significant research. In the case of Vietnam 'there are more imponderables than most people realize who are agitating against it.' However, this circumspection and sense of ambivalence were not new and were, in many ways, a characteristic response to a political question for which there appeared no wholly acceptable answer. Indeed, the tone of his letter of Christmas Day 1965 was strikingly similar to those he had written when contemplating membership of the Communist Party or his feelings regarding the draft. He wrote, 'maybe the only important thing now is to get out and protest,' but confessed 'this is normally not my style.' He was troubled by the awareness that 'things are terribly wrong' but his inability to find certainty in 'the things that ought to be done to set them right.' As he had always done, he would reconcile these competing desires for thought and action through his writing.¹⁸

In 1965, Fritz Stern brought together a small number of Columbia faculty to consider the situation in Vietnam.¹⁹ Their regular meetings culminated in a private letter to President Lyndon Johnson in which they expressed a desire to establish a relationship between the academic community and the administration, to fulfil their responsibilities as citizens, and to offer their assistance if sought. The signatories, who included Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, Robert Merton, David Truman and several others, confessed that they 'had long been deeply concerned about the course of events in Vietnam.' Their silence, which had been due to an unwillingness to join with the 'ill-informed and simplistic' criticisms being made in public by others, could no longer be maintained, lest it be interpreted as approval. They felt that the current strategy was a reversal of the policy Johnson had outlined in the 1964 campaign and that had led to their support of his candidacy. Most importantly, they were anxious 'about the ultimate effects of this war on the American mind and consequently on the state of our politics.' The protracted conflict in Korea and the impetus that this gave to the forces of political reaction,

¹⁸ Hofstadter to Swados, 8 December, 1965; 25 December 1965, HSP Box 31.

¹⁹ Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 246.

remained fresh in the memory, and there was a real fear that the progress being made in domestic politics would be imperilled by a military stalemate. They concluded by urging Johnson to reconsider his current course of action; as guidance, they proffered nine policy suggestions. To Daniel Bell's surprise, Johnson responded with a seven-page letter which was signed off with the comment that 'It is always good to hear from gentlemen.' However, despite the gracious tone, the president assured them that he was constantly re-examining policy and was confident that the current policy was the correct one.²⁰

The escalation of the conflict in Vietnam provided increased momentum to the student protest movement which had been growing in strength and numbers since the establishment of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1960. As the protests reached Columbia, Hofstadter and his colleagues found themselves in an intractable position. They were faced with defending an institution against protesters with whom they shared opposition to the war, and more importantly, with whom they had shared concerns regarding the leadership of the university. In the wake of the first sit-in at Columbia, a protest against CIA recruitment on campus in February 1967, Hofstadter wrote Grayson Kirk, the university president, to urge leniency. In a somewhat patronising tone, he described the protesters as 'sensitive young men whose moral sensibilities have been worked on by a troubled world.'²¹ The letter was indicative of Hofstadter's position during the period of campus ferment, as he played the role of mediator between what he saw as an intransigent administration and students whose grievances were real but with whose tactics he deemed to be foolish and self-indulgent.

As the level of disruption and violence mounted, a group of faculty members, including Hofstadter, made their feelings known to the Committee on Instruction. They warned that the conflict on campus could not be ignored and 'the place and function of universities in the larger society are today acutely problematic.' The atmosphere of

²⁰ Bell, et al. to Lyndon Johnson, 18 May 1966; Johnson to Bell, June 16, 1966, RHP, Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

²¹ Hofstadter to Grayson Kirk, 27 February, 1967, RHP Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence. It is interesting to note that Hofstadter had been unwilling to sign a public petition calling for leniency but preferred to correspond with Kirk in private.

crisis was a threat to the 'traditional and central functions of the university' and teaching, learning and research were all likely to suffer under such conditions.²² This concern that the sanctity of the university was at risk was of the utmost concern to Hofstadter. Earlier in 1967, when the rumblings of discontent at Columbia were just starting, he delivered a speech at Berkeley on the topic of "Academic Freedom in the University". The moral crises of racial injustice and the war in Vietnam made student agitation and campus conflict inevitable, but Hofstadter hoped the cost of this conflict 'will be borne with patience.' Disaster could be avoided, but this required both a degree of indulgence from the administration, and self-restraint amongst the students. Most important of all, the university's role as a centre for free inquiry and criticism must not be sacrificed for any cause.²³

Any hope of conciliation at Columbia was dashed in the spring of 1968 as the university plunged headlong into crisis. A series of actions by the university, the most divisive of which were the disciplinary action taken against six SDS protesters and the commencement of construction on a gymnasium in Morningside Park, which was dubbed Gym Crow, prompted SDS and the Society of Afro-American Students (SAS) to organise a protest rally. The Sundial Rally of April 23 saw protesters seize Hamilton Hall, the first of several university buildings that would come under the control of the protesters. Throughout the following week, there were attempts to find a peaceful resolution to the occupation but no compromise could be reached and in the early hours of April 30, the administration called in the New York City police. The violent scenes, which saw 712 arrested and 148 students and faculty members injured, sent shockwaves around the university and left Hofstadter in a state of despair. His sense of despondency was summed up in a letter written by his secretary to Nathan Glick just two days later in which she explained, 'for the time being, our disturbances here have put him out of business. He can't write anything, or do anything.'²⁴

²² A. Kent Hieatt, et al. to the Committee on Instruction, Columbia College, 3 October, 1967, RHP Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

²³ Hofstadter, "Academic Freedom in the University", printed in *The Daily Californian*, May 1, 1967, 8,9.

²⁴ Jane Slater to Nathan Glick, 2 May 1968, RHP Box 3 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

Upon his return to Hamilton Hall, Hofstadter found his office untouched and a note on his desk which read, 'The Forces of Liberation have, at great length, decided to spare your office (because you are not one of them).'²⁵ The sentiment expressed gives an interesting insight into Hofstadter's standing at the university at the time of the events. Hofstadter was a critic of the war and seen to be sympathetic to many of the criticisms of the administration voiced by the students. As he himself explained in the immediate aftermath of the occupation, 'the students had a few good issues, very good issues, and a number of minor grievances that we ought to attend to.'²⁶ Despite his unequivocal condemnation of their tactics, he retained a degree of respect amongst the radicals which owed much to his willingness engage in dialogue with students and a personal desire to understand their motives. The close relationships he fostered with his graduate students, at least one of whom was involved in the occupation, afforded him considerable insight into the mindset of the younger generation. Most importantly, he did not allow the significant differences of opinion to alter these personal and professional relationships.²⁷

The divisions at Columbia increased after the occupation. In spite of the overwhelming sense of gloom, Hofstadter determined to spend 'whatever time I have in the immediate future... trying to salvage this university.'²⁸ He was soon faced with a challenge that would sorely test his dedication to the university. The events of April had rendered it impossible for Kirk to deliver the commencement address at the spring graduation ceremony. In need of a figure who might bring some sense of unity to the occasion, Hofstadter was approached to take what he described as the 'strange and unwelcome role.'²⁹ A number of his graduate students urged him to decline the invitation, but he

²⁵ Note from "The Forces of Liberation", RHP Box 27.

²⁶ Transcript of interview by G.J. Slovic, May 15, 1968, RHP SUNY, Box 2.

²⁷ Hofstadter was in telephone conversation with Michael Wallace, his graduate student, during the occupation. Wallace indicated that Hofstadter advised him of the imminent police raid and suggested that he leave the building. He had also provided Hofstadter's details as a first contact when detained by the police. Wallace would go on to co-publish a book with Hofstadter entitled *American Violence*, which he explained was Hofstadter's attempt to save Wallace's career. Michael Wallace interview with author, New York, September 15, 2014.

²⁸ Hofstadter to Illinois Centre for Advanced Study, May 6, 1968, RHP Box 5 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

²⁹ Hofstadter to Swados, June 7, 1968, HSP Box 31.

ignored their concerns on the grounds that he felt himself to be the least divisive option available.³⁰ Despite being considered a consensual figure, the address was not held at Low Plaza for security reasons and instead took place, with the support of a considerable police presence, at the Cathedral of St John the Divine. As Hofstadter commenced his speech, 300 students walked out and made their way to Low Plaza to join a counter-commencement ceremony at which Dwight MacDonald and Erich Fromm addressed the 2000 students who had gathered in protest. Perhaps in a sign of respect to Hofstadter, the students left peacefully and silently, and he was left to continue his speech without interruption.

In a reprise of the speech he had given at Berkeley a year earlier, Hofstadter spoke of the righteous anger of students who were appalled by the persistence of racial inequality and the conflict in Vietnam. Once again, he addressed the crisis that American education faced when the university's role as a centre of free inquiry and criticism, and as 'an intellectual and spiritual balance wheel' came under attack from those that wished to make it a hub of political action. He shared the students' outrage at the war and understood their alienation from the political process, but called for an appreciation that the university was 'a community of a special kind', the 'best and most benign side of our society.' That it allowed, indeed encouraged, a plurality of thought and opinion and that it both tolerated and protected those who challenged its own rules, policies and procedures made it a unique institution. This freedom was inevitably accompanied by a fragility which must be protected by the self-imposition of restraint by its members and a 'scrupulous...dedication to the conditions of orderly and peaceable discussion.' The occupation of the university, the demands of the students and the unwillingness to compromise 'thrust at the vitals of university life' and threatened the destruction of both academic freedom and the university as whole. It was accepted that mistakes had been made on both sides and there was an urgent need for university reform. He concluded with the hope that reform could be achieved through the exchange of views in a 'calm and deliberative spirit.' If unsuccessful, the university, the 'centre of our culture and our

³⁰ Eric Foner. Personal Interview. September 16, 2014; Fritz Stern recalls that there were also real fears for Hofstadter's safety amongst some on his faculty colleagues. *Five Germanys*, 256.

hope' would 'languish and fail' at a time when society's need for it was at its very greatest.³¹

The commencement speech, which was later published in *The American Scholar*, was described by Eric McKittrick as Hofstadter's 'finest hour'. In his letter to Hofstadter, he remarked, 'Everyone I've talked to has pronounced it a masterpiece.'³² Diane Trilling confessed that she had found it 'very moving, deeply moving,' and recounted that she 'wasn't the only person who began to cry.'³³ The 'magisterial speech' delivered with poise and 'quiet eloquence' certainly struck a chord amongst his academic colleagues, both within Columbia and beyond, and he received countless letters of congratulation.³⁴ Meyer Schapiro, who had been abroad during what he described as the 'battle of Morningside,' described it as a 'beautiful statement' that should be read by everyone within the university.³⁵ The sense, amongst those of Hofstadter's generation, of the importance of his speech as a defence of the institution of the university was encapsulated by the Harvard sociologist Daniel P. Moynihan, who wrote, 'It is one of the most moving and eloquent documents of the age. Of any age.'³⁶ However, the outpouring of praise from his peers was not reflective of the feelings of the university community as a whole. Despite the resignation of Kirk, which had been precipitated by a petition signed by Hofstadter and other senior faculty members, there remained many who were unconvinced by the prospect of gradual reform. As Eric Foner recalls, the events of 1968 'shattered the community at Columbia' and, despite the plaudits, Hofstadter's call for harmony was destined to fall largely on deaf ears.³⁷

³¹ Hofstadter, "The 214th Columbia University Commencement Address", *The American Scholar*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Autumn, 1968), 583-589.

³² Eric McKittrick to Hofstadter, June 19, 1968, Eric McKittrick Papers Box 29, Columbia Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

³³ Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 155.

³⁴ Stern, *Five Germanys*, 256.

³⁵ Meyer Schapiro to Hofstadter, July 17, 1968, RHP Catalogued Correspondence.

³⁶ Daniel Moynihan to Hofstadter, October 14, 1968, RHP Catalogued Correspondence.

³⁷ Michael J Birkner interview with Eric Foner, 1992.

<https://richardhofstadter100.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hofstadter-at-100/devitalized-center/columbia-1968/eric-foner-interview> Accessed 02/07/18.

Hofstadter continued to be greatly affected by the events that had occurred on campus. Later in the summer he admitted, 'I have not been able to wash my psyche of the detritus of the Columbia insurrection.' Importantly, the crisis had not only led to concerns about the future of the university, but also his position within the historical profession. The actions of 'a bunch of silly kids' had brought him to the conclusion that 'one has been wasting one's time.'³⁸ These doubts regarding the relevance of his own work had started to appear as early as 1960, but began to appear with increasing regularity in the later years of the decade.³⁹ As his work came under attack from the younger generation of historians, he began to worry that his writing was 'wholly outmoded' and that he was 'very fast becoming obsolescent.'⁴⁰ This sense of being part of a generation of historians whose influence was on the wane gave his next major book, *The Progressive Historians*, an additional level of personal significance. Whilst ostensibly a study of the previous half-century of American historiography, the work, commenced in 1966, was in many ways one of self-reflection. As Hofstadter explained to his friend Jack Pole, 'I suppose that I'm really writing this book for myself, to settle my own intellectual accounts.'⁴¹ At a time when he felt himself to be 'all too rapidly becoming an elder', the 're-enactment of [his] own parricidal forays' offered some degree of comfort and reassurance.⁴²

The Progressive Historians, as Hofstadter explained to his editor, was 'basically a book about three books.' Those three books, the most influential works of history published in the first half of the twentieth century, provided a framework for an examination of the relationship between works of history and their authors, and that of the author to the wider intellectual and political life of the nation. Whilst clearly a work of historiographical criticism, it was also an intellectual history of the period rooted in the biographies of the three historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, Vernon Parrington, and Charles Beard. It was 'these men above all others', Hofstadter contended, 'who

³⁸ Hofstadter to Eric McKittrick, June 22, 1968, Eric McKittrick Papers, Box 29.

³⁹ Hofstadter to Eric McKittrick, undated, in response to letter of August 22, 1960, Eric McKittrick Papers, Box 29.

⁴⁰ Hofstadter to Robert Kelley, February 21, 1969, RHP Box 5 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁴¹ Hofstadter to Jack Pole, February 9, 1967, RHP Box 7 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁴² Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) xiv.

explained the American liberal mind to itself.' An analysis of the three central texts therefore illuminated not only a shift in historical perspective, but the changing political landscape. The Progressive historians shared an unshakeable 'faith in the sufficiency of liberalism,' which appeared naïve and misplaced in the 'more complex and terrifying' post-war world. In this new era, the three historians 'ceased to be the leading interpreters of our past and became simply part of it.'⁴³

As he had in his 1949 essay, Hofstadter situated Turner and his thesis firmly within the spirit of Western political revolt that had dominated the rhetoric of the period. His address, symptomatic of the new Western spirit, marked the beginning of a new movement in history in which 'the very essence of American nationality was recaptured from Eastern historians and turned over to the substantial majority of Americans who lived beyond the Appalachians.' The 'germ' theory of his mentor Herbert Baxter Adams, in which democracy had spread to the United States from Europe, and by implication from East coast to West, was replaced by a concept which placed the distinctive environment of the frontier as the central feature of American democracy. Whilst the initial reaction was fairly muted, the paper marked a radical departure in American historiography and announced a vision of history that would come to dominate historical writing for a generation. Importantly, it fulfilled not only the needs of a historical profession in search of a means to make history relevant, but its mythic quality appealed to the public imagination. At a time of social and political crisis, the frontier thesis satisfied 'the American yearning for the simple, natural, unrecoverable past.'⁴⁴

Turner's 'deep and calm satisfaction with the American past' reflected a strong sense of national and sectional pride, but also served to weaken the impact of his work as an 'instrument of intellectual or social criticism.' Hofstadter was critical of his work for lacking what he deemed to be an essential element of good history, 'a strong feeling for the tragedy of history.' For Hofstadter's generation, Turner's romantic nationalism had

⁴³ Hofstadter to Ashbel Green, September 27, 1967, RHP Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence; *The Progressive Historians*, xii, xv.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48, 50, 76.

appeared somewhat at odds with the harsh reality of life in America as they had experienced it in the 1930s. The spirit of individualism he had celebrated ceased to be considered a virtue in a society faced with the human costs of an economic disaster caused by the reckless individualism of the business classes. Furthermore, Hofstadter and his contemporaries, many of whom had grown up in big cities and were from ethnic minority backgrounds, felt little passion for the rural, Protestant bias of a thesis that lauded the values of the old-stock pioneers of a bygone era.⁴⁵

Like Turner, Beard was raised in the Midwest and grew up in a household which was both politically engaged and financially comfortable. A product of the Populist-Progressive tradition, his social criticism was, according to Hofstadter, typical of 'a man who belongs, both morally and materially, to the possessing classes.'⁴⁶ Whilst Beard's radicalism may well have been reflective of the 'conscience of the well-to-do', there could be no doubt about the strength of his passion for social change. However, his activist impulse and moral passion did not sit easily with the values of detached knowledge and scientific inquiry that informed Hofstadter's model of historical scholarship. For Beard, knowledge was instrumental rather than static and passive, and as a historian he eschewed the idea that history be a celebration of the past. Instead, he conceived of his work as prompt to social action and his primary concern was for the problems of the present and the solutions of the future. Whilst Hofstadter had been critical of Turner's failure to make use of history as an instrument of intellectual and social criticism, Beard was guilty of excessive present-mindedness.

Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* was the focal point of Hofstadter's study, and he placed what he described as a 'masterful summation of scattered insights and arguments' in its historical context. Whilst Beard's book was greeted with outrage by many outside the academic community, the arguments put forth were already familiar to those within the academy and the work was received favourably. Yet, despite the fact the conclusions were not altogether novel, Hofstadter pointed to the innovative nature of the book. It was the 'first truly exciting monograph in the history of American

⁴⁵ Ibid., 104, 105

⁴⁶ Ibid., 168.

historiography,' the excitement achieved not by artistic flourish or narrative interest, but solely by the 'force and provocation of its argument.' Beard was undoubtedly at his most provocative, and caused the greatest outrage, when emphasizing the public security holdings of the Founders. It was also, as Hofstadter had outlined in his 1950 essay, where the ambiguity of Beard's thought was most clearly shown.⁴⁷

The suggestion that the financial interests of the Founders played a significant role in the framing of the Constitution drew criticism from many quarters, including President William Howard Taft, who publicly denounced the book. Whilst the contrast in reception between those within and without the academy might suggest such indignation was the result of a lack of sophistication amongst readers, Hofstadter noted an ambivalence within the work that allowed for differing interpretations. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who could not be accused of having an untutored mind, privately remarked that 'notwithstanding the disavowal of personal innuendo, it encouraged and I suspect was meant to...the notion that personal interests...accounted for the attitude they took.' As Holmes suggested, Beard himself denied any direct relationship to personal gain; in later years, Beard defended his study simply as an economic and sociological account of the constitutional debates designed to bring a sense of realism to a subject hitherto restricted by a deadening preoccupation with abstract political principles. Yet, as Hofstadter demonstrated, despite Beard's desire to distance himself from the crude economic determinism that some attributed to his work, there were multiple passages that might prompt such a conclusion. The contradictory impulses within the work were indicative of an unconscious ambivalence in mind and temperament. Hofstadter concluded that the book showed the difficulty Beard had in reconciling his passion as 'the reformer, the moralist, the rebel against authority' with 'the Beard of Knightstown, reared in solid Republicanism...an American patriot who indeed revered the practical genius of the Founding Fathers.' The result was a book whose interpretation was left in the hands of the readers.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 190, 211.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 212, 216.

Hofstadter was intensely critical of Beard's dualistic approach which, typical of the Progressive mind, saw democracy pitted against the privileged elite. In assessing the Constitution in accordance with the political ideals of his own era, Beard was guilty of producing an anachronistic account divorced from the contemporaneous reality. To a mind enthused by the spirit of popular democracy, the link between political ideas and interests was a direct and simple one. As he had explained in 1937, 'In political history, if not all history, there are no ideas with which interests are not associated and there are not interests utterly devoid of ideas.' However, Hofstadter, who had devoted much of his writing to an analysis of the complex relationship between the two, viewed Beard's assumptions that ideas are naturally linked to economic interest as too rudimentary to account for human action. By failing to consider the limitations imposed by historical circumstance and social structures, the influence of inherited ideas and past events, and the importance of moral and cultural forces, Beard was blinded to any explanation that could not be explained by immediate concerns. Most importantly for Hofstadter, Beard omitted 'the whole area of *experience* in which ideas and interests are jumbled to a degree that the effort to divorce and counterpose them becomes an artificial imposition on the realities of history.' Beard's attempt to expose the reality of the framing of the constitution became, due to the narrowness of his framework, a re-reading of the past through his own selective estimation of that reality.⁴⁹

In a letter to Vernon Parrington's son, Hofstadter recalled that when he had first read *Main Currents In American Thought* in 1938, 'his work came to me with the force of revelation.'⁵⁰ Whilst his enthusiasm had waned, it was easy to recall the interest that Parrington's work had generated at a time when the history of ideas was in its infancy. Indeed, the work was so strikingly different, Hofstadter noted, that it was not reviewed in the historical quarterlies and was not considered, by many historians, to be a work of history. Nevertheless, Parrington's work generated considerable interest in American intellectual history and he would have an influence that equalled that of both Turner and Beard in the decade following its publication. However, unlike the other two

⁴⁹ Ibid., 243, 245.

⁵⁰ Hofstadter to Vernon Parrington Jr, September 22, 1967, RHP Box 7 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

historians, this influence was short-lived and his reputation suffered a remarkably abrupt decline. Despite its novelty as a work of history, Hofstadter contended that it was one which belonged to the past, its publication coming at a time when 'a new set of receptivities, a new sensibility belonging to another moment than his own, were in the process of formation.'⁵¹ His assessment of American literary culture in terms of political ideals made for a 'one-dimensional' book, out of step with the prevailing currents in the field in which it most naturally sat: literary criticism.

That Parrington chose to make his study one that read the history of American literature through the development of American democracy reflected his deep attachment to the values of Western Progressivism. As he himself explained, 'In the most receptive years of my life I came under the influence of...the frontier with its democratic sympathies and democratic economics.' He further admitted, 'From that influence I have never been able to escape, nor have I wished to.' It was against these personal ideals that he weighed his subjects and the result was what Hofstadter described as a work that exhibited a 'partisan dualism' in which democrats were pitted against aristocrats and dissenters against the established order. It was not the artistic integrity but the political and social sympathies of the writer which determined their final merit and this emphasis brought an 'unresolved ambiguity' to a study suspended between literature and political thought.⁵²

Hofstadter criticized Parrington for the imposition of a set of predetermined interests on the rich history of American letters. In doing so, 'he painted with a palette confined...to a few stark primary colours and permitted himself only the broadest and boldest stroke of the brush.' Although grounded in biography, his formulaic approach necessitated the categorization of figures without consideration of those individual particularities that might cast real light on the intellectual character of his subjects. Ideas were divorced from the experiences from which they arose, and took on a static quality that failed to account of their vital movement and changing function through time. As Hofstadter summed it up, 'In *Main Currents* ideas do not develop, they only

⁵¹ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 378

⁵² Ibid., 368, 396, 415.

recur.’ Most objectionable to Hofstadter was the fact that Parrington’s categorization was based on a crude moral judgment, rigidly applied and insensitive to individuality. In a contemporaneous letter he had set out his own sense of the place of moral judgment in historical writing. He explained to a student that he did not object to moral judgments but expected that the historian ‘will take account of the moral complexity of events or movements.’ He felt that his own work was not devoid of moral judgment but this was always tempered by his ‘frequent ambivalence about the men and movements’ he wrote about. It was this lack of awareness of ambiguity that disturbed him not only in the work of Parrington, but throughout the historical profession.⁵³

Hofstadter concluded his work with a summation of the debate over conflict and consensus in American historiography and a comment on the current state of the field. It was a reflection on his own position, and in many ways a defence of the pluralistic vision of history which he felt to be coming under attack from a generation of historians who saw renewed virtue in the activist stance of the Progressives. As Henry Nash Smith described it in a letter to Hofstadter, ‘you are writing a chapter in the collective autobiography of a whole generation of people who work in American history and literature.’⁵⁴ Yet at the time of writing Hofstadter had felt unsure of its value due what he described as his own ambivalence regarding the subject.⁵⁵ This incertitude was further strengthened by a letter from Eric McKittrick in which he described the debate as ‘straw in the wind.’ He warned Hofstadter that the reaction from younger historians was that it was ‘an out of date argument’ and there was a real danger that Hofstadter would appear as if he was ‘still locked in the argument.’⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Hofstadter felt compelled to retain the chapter, and whilst his ambivalence was apparent, it served only to strengthen his call for balance and an acceptance of the essential complexity of the past.

⁵³ Ibid., 400, 401; Hofstadter to William Novak, November 15, 1967, RHP Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁵⁴ Henry Nash Smith to Hofstadter, December 3, 1968, RHP Box 8 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁵⁵ Hofstadter to Peter Gay, February 2, 1968, RHP Box 3 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

⁵⁶ Eric McKittrick to Hofstadter, February 14, 1968. RHP Box 6 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

The movement away from history dominated by political and economic conflict was not solely a reaction to the changing political environment. Whilst the events of the post-war period undoubtedly shifted the intellectual mood to one that saw the nation in a more favourable light, Hofstadter pointed to the 'inner dialectic' of ideas. The pendulum of conflict had reached the maximal point of its natural arc and it became inevitable that it would swing in the opposite direction. That this movement would lead to the opposite extreme was, to a large extent, unavoidable, and Hofstadter accepted that there was some truth in the concerns that the idea of consensus might be used to endorse a conservative stance. Nevertheless, he was keen to stress that it was not intrinsically linked to ideological conservatism and its failing was primarily its inherent weakness as a historical model. The concept of consensus as he had used it in *The American Political Tradition* owed a great deal to the Marxism of his early years and he retained a belief that significant portions of the nation's past yielded to a consensus approach grounded in left-wing thought. However, its key value had always been as 'a counter-assertion more than an empirical tool.' It had been, Hofstadter felt, a valuable corrective, but one which had only transitional merit. The keyword for Hofstadter was now that of 'comity', the idea of a 'moral consensus' that had characterized the nation's political history. That there had been conflict was undoubted, but this had almost always been within certain accepted parameters, and restrained by a political system that allowed for the legitimacy of opposition.⁵⁷

Hofstadter's hope for the future was that an awareness that conflict and consensus were 'bound up in a kind of dialectic of their own' would lead to a more sophisticated approach to the writing of history. The search for new methods of historical understanding and, in particular, the renewed interest in the role of ideas and the awareness of the symbolic aspects of politics, were steps in this direction. However, the atmosphere of political crisis that had enveloped the nation in the Sixties had brought the question of the public role of the historian back, once again, to the forefront of the debate, and Hofstadter was troubled by the consequences for the profession. In early 1968, Hofstadter himself admitted, 'I am having a great deal of trouble figuring out what

⁵⁷ *Progressive Historians*, 439, 450, 453, 454, 464.

I think about the historian engagé.' He concluded that the answer had less to do with the persuasiveness of the arguments for and against, and more to do with 'the dictates of their temperaments.' The profession remained healthy only when the plurality of individual voices was respectfully heard. Hofstadter feared that the voice of his generation was in danger of being drowned out by that of a generation 'feverishly committed' to political action. The demand for an understanding of historical complexity was being written off as path to political inertia and Hofstadter noted a return to the simple dualism of the Progressives. Such a movement threatened to dispense with the insight gained in the previous two decades, the awareness 'not only of complexity, but of defeat and failure.' A feeling for social responsibility was essential to the work of the historian, but this must be accompanied by an appreciation of the inevitable limits imposed by the reality of both the past and the present.⁵⁸

Although first used as a term in *The Progressive Historians*, the concept of comity in American history was one that Hofstadter had been considering for some time. In March 1965 he had been invited by Berkeley to deliver the Jefferson Memorial Lectures in the Fall of the following year. The lectures became the basis for *The Idea of a Party System*, eventually published in 1969, which expanded the initial focus on the idea of party amongst the Virginia Dynasty to trace the development of the two-party system in the years between 1780 and 1840. Hofstadter had been struck by the paradox between the thought and actions of the Founders. They had been both scornful and fearful of the 'terror of party spirit' and framed a constitution that was devised to counteract such partisanship. Yet they felt the need to establish parties almost as soon as the national government had been constituted. They stood, Hofstadter described, 'at a moment of fecund inconsistency, suspended between their acceptance...of political differences' and 'their rejection of parties as agencies to organize social conflict and political debate.' Whilst they had sufficient political sagacity to understand the inevitability of conflicting opinion, they remained hopeful that some form of national unity could be established. Political parties therefore appeared to fulfil no function other than that of sowing seeds of discord. The gradual shift in perception to one that not only accepted the inevitability

⁵⁸ Ibid., 464, 466; Hofstadter to Jack Pole, January 24, 1968. RHP Box 7 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

of parties but saw it as an essential element of American democracy was the subject of Hofstadter's study. It was a historical explanation of the idea of legitimate opposition, the cornerstone of American comity.⁵⁹

The influence of the Tory political philosopher, Henry Bolingbroke, 'that fountainhead of anti-party thought,' was of primary significance in the early years of the republic.⁶⁰ It was a position, reflected in the thought of the Alexander Hamilton, which called for the suppression of party faction. Paradoxically, as Hofstadter indicated, Hamilton was a committed Federalist and a fiercely partisan party organizer. This evident contradiction was indicative of a view that party affiliations were justified solely for the purpose of bringing national unity and the ultimate elimination of parties. In power, the Federalist leaders, Hofstadter wrote, 'made no secret of their hope of destroying opposition,' and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 carried such logic into law.⁶¹ The punitive measures that, in effect, outlawed criticism of the government, made no pretension to respect the validity of political opposition. Their efforts proved ultimately to be unsuccessful, and divisions within the party opened the door for a Republican administration.

Despite their own painful experience as an opposition party, the Republicans 'had not fully reconciled' themselves 'to the necessity of an opposition.'⁶² Jefferson's strategy of conciliation with the Federalists was based not on an acceptance of opposition parties, but rather an attempt to absorb the moderate elements into a harmonious coalition. Just three weeks after his inauguration, he wrote, 'Nothing shall be spared on my part to obliterate the traces of party and consolidate the nation.'⁶³ Whilst he saw limited success in his attempts to blunt the opposition of the Federalist leaders, his policies won unanimous support amongst the wider public. The 1804 election, which saw the Republicans outweigh the Federalists by four to one in the Senate and five to one in the House, suggested that the great hope of national unanimity was drawing close. In his

⁵⁹ Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), viii, ix

⁶⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁶¹ Ibid., 106.

⁶² Ibid., 121.

⁶³ Ibid., 151.

second inaugural address, Jefferson felt confident to speak of a 'union of sentiment now manifested so generally', and of the prospect of an 'entire union of opinion.'⁶⁴

When James Monroe took office, he could look out from the White House on a nation 'self-confident and strikingly unified.' Yet, it remained a nation 'led largely by politicians whose minds were fixated on obsolescent antagonisms.' Monroe remained fearful of the dangers of organised political opposition and pushed forward in an attempt to prevent a revival of Federalism and extinguish party divisions. Unlike his predecessors, he did not view the issue of parties as one linked to human nature, but rather as a sign of a defective political system. Opposition parties were acceptable in the Old World, but the perfection achievable within the republican system rendered it unnecessary. Both Jefferson and Madison had, on occasion, shown some understanding of the inevitability of parties, and even on rare occasions the possible value of opposition. However, Monroe with his optimistic view of American exceptionalism was unwavering in his faith in the one-party system.⁶⁵

The anti-party spirit that had been their inheritance from England continued to inform the nation's leaders despite the changing political landscape. However, a new generation of leaders were coming of age and as the electorate grew ever larger and the presidential contest was opened to the popular vote, these men had cause to reconsider the ideas of their predecessors. Political competition, once greatly feared as a threat to social harmony, came to be seen as essential to the maintenance of a peaceful society. The checks and balances that the Founders had been determined to enshrine in the constitution could be fully realised through the competition between political parties. By making ideology secondary to pragmatic concerns and placing the necessities of the contemporary political reality before political theory, the Albany Regency formulated a 'complete, articulate, quite sophisticated, quite modern defense of the political party.' Central to this idea, and to the on-going strength of the American political system was the 'immensely sophisticated notion of a legitimate opposition.' It marked a turning

⁶⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 172, 197.

point in American political history, and, Hofstadter later contended, in the history of democracy.⁶⁶

Hofstadter concluded by addressing contemporary criticism of the American political system. The party system was now characterized as stable but bland, the two major parties offering a false sense of conflict whilst united in their determination to maintain the consensus and contain dissent. It was a view Hofstadter himself had set forth in his original introduction to *The American Political Tradition*. Twenty years later, his appreciation of the ability of the American political system to contain extremism and the value of pluralism and moderation as a basis for political action, had led him to assess the system in a different light. It is noteworthy that when accepting an award for the book Hofstadter explicitly stated, 'I did not write my book with the intention of justifying the American two-party system.'⁶⁷ Indeed, he made clear that he did not believe that the country had been particularly well governed throughout its history. However, importantly, he believed this to be a result of the historical deficiencies in political culture, rather than the political system. In drawing attention to the experiences of the Founders and the development of the two-party system, he hoped that there might be lessons to be learned that would be worthy of consideration in the present age.

The triumph of the two-party system had ensured the American political system was one which was 'resilient and well-seasoned' and, as such, it was likely to cope with the political violence that was enveloping the nation. Nevertheless, Hofstadter had confessed in a 1968 lecture at UCLA that 'the fears that lurk in the margins of [his] mind' now meant he could 'imagine more than dimly the outlines of a possible series of historical changes that would bring an end to American liberal democracy.' The prevention of such a disaster was, Hofstadter made the case, 'the major business of our generation.' A look back at the past showed the recent increase in violence was simply a return to the usual American pattern. The preceding thirty years of relative calm had

⁶⁶ Ibid., 251, 252, Hofstadter, "Political Parties", in C. Vann Woodward, *The Comparative Approach to American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 209; Hofstadter, Van Am Award Speech for *The Idea of a Party System*, May 5, 1970, RHP Box 23, 3.

⁶⁷ Hofstadter, Van Am Speech, 4.

masked the fact that America was a nation that had always been characterized by violence and allowed for a misleadingly self-satisfied sense of complacency. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and the proliferation of riots across the nation's major cities, had brought violence back to the forefront of the American consciousness.⁶⁸

In his UCLA lecture, Hofstadter identified four factors, with varying degrees of importance, in the history of American violence. Despite being cautious about attaching undue significance to the heritage of the frontier, Hofstadter could not deny that it had played a role in the creation of a vigilante spirit quite distinct in the United States. Furthermore, the peculiar hostility to authority, particularly that exercised by the government, led to a resistance to organised force and militarism but strengthened the passion for personal arms and local militia. Both tendencies, established in the very early days of the national experience, determined the violent nature of the reaction to perceived threat. Therefore, it was inevitable that the increasing heterogeneity of the nation, and the ensuing societal change, would be met with a violent response. The use of violence against the perceived other was most frequently meted out on the grounds of race. As Hofstadter wrote in the introduction to *American Violence*, 'The truth is that all too often...the contents of the melting-pot did not melt; or when it did, it was only under fire.' The issue of racial violence, Hofstadter lamented, was one that 'still torments us today.'⁶⁹

The increase in violence in the late 1960s was, as Hofstadter had explained, another peak in a well-established pattern. However, he considered it important to examine the distinctive nature of the recent violence and, in his lecture, he pointed to five factors that made the current situation different from past episodes. The present violence was centred on the large urban areas, reflective of government failure to address the many

⁶⁸ Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States", in Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (eds) *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) 43, Hofstadter address at UCLA 11/08/1968, Archives of the Communications Studies Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (digitized 2013) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7AkKe7xUSc>.

⁶⁹ Hofstadter address at UCLA.; Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States", 13.

urgent problems that arose from urban deprivation. A large proportion of the deprived were African Americans who had 'come to despair of the peaceful and gradualist techniques' for betterment that were supposedly on offer. These urban issues were further exacerbated by the economic impact of the war in Vietnam which resulted in funds being diverted from Great Society social programs to the military. The war itself had been hugely divisive and this coincided with a new kind of politics on the left, what Hofstadter described as the 'politics of self-expression.' All of these issues were magnified, as they had never been before, by mass media exposure, which was being used to skilful effect by a radical minority and raised the spectre of a 'contagion of violence.' The combination of factors, Hofstadter suggested, raised the possibility of a major political disaster.⁷⁰

Whilst Hofstadter was clear in his opposition to violence, he had at least a degree of sympathy for the aims of the Black Panthers. Indeed, in April 1968 he had written to the California parole board to request leniency in the case of Eldridge Cleaver and had made a donation to his support fund. His letters to both Shirley Sutherland, who requested that he sign a statement, and to the chairman of the parole board, provide considerable insight into his position. Hofstadter was critical of the Oakland police who he suggested had instigated the shootout in an attempt to trap and intimidate members of the Black Panther party. However, given his objection to 'the accumulation of guns for any purpose by any private political group' and his unwillingness to have Cleaver described as a 'political prisoner', he felt unable to lend his support to the prepared statement. He explained that his interest in Cleaver was 'as a civil libertarian, and a sympathizer of the struggle for racial justice' and, whilst he agreed the Black Panthers had a moral case, he considered their use of violence as a tactic to be one which was misguided and felt it likely to alienate possible support. Hofstadter's criticism of the Black Panthers use of violence as a tactic is further explored in *American Violence*. Here he writes 'violence that would...lead to a full realization of the rights of blacks would have a great deal to be

⁷⁰ Hofstadter address at UCLA.

said for it.' Importantly, Hofstadter did not think it would work, and this was the ultimate determinant of the tactical merit of violence.⁷¹

The primary target of Hofstadter's ire was the 'rising mystique of violence on the left' and the tolerance of such actions by liberal intellectuals. He bemoaned the fact that 'almost the entire intellectual community is lost in dissent... Radicalism is irresistibly chic.' His co-author, Michael Wallace, himself a student radical and key figure in the Columbia occupation, questioned Hofstadter's focus on a group whose involvement in violence paled into insignificance when compared to that of others. Hofstadter responded by explaining that it was a question of audience. He considered himself to be in 'a working dialectical relationship only with certain kinds of white intellectuals, young and old' and, by necessity, he approached the topic from this frame of reference. The events at Columbia still weighed heavily on Hofstadter's mind and his original sympathy for the aims of the student radicals had been completely lost as his anger grew at their increasingly self-indulgent tactics. They had altogether forsaken the politics of compromise and calculation that had served as a basis for the actions of generations of liberal reformers. Instead, they relied solely on the politics of self-expression and style. By seeking to find 'existential values in politics' the young radicals had lost sight of the central purpose of political action, that of getting results.⁷²

Despite the possibility of a worsening situation, Hofstadter remained confident that an end to the war in Vietnam might prove to be a turning point. The more favourable economic and political climate of a post-Vietnam era would allow for the resumption of social policies directed at urban deprivation and racial injustice. This, Hofstadter expected, would lead black activists to reassess both their methods and their goals. As for the students, their disaffection seemed destined to continue for the foreseeable future, but he felt it likely that American withdrawal would temper the emotional

⁷¹ Hofstadter to Miss Sutherland, April 16, 1968; Hofstadter to Henry Kerr, California Adult Authority, April 18, 1968, RHP Box 2 Uncatalogued Correspondence; "Reflections on Violence", 35.

⁷² Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence", 29; Hofstadter, "The Age of Rubbish", *Newsweek*, July 6, 1970, 21, 22; Hofstadter to Michael Wallace, August 26, 1969, RHP Box 9 Uncatalogued Correspondence.

intensity of their radicalism. This hope that the American system would prove robust enough to survive the crises that it was currently experiencing was tempered by an underlying pessimism that the issues would not be satisfactorily resolved. In an evocative allusion to W.B. Yeats' 'The Second Coming', he concluded his essay by writing, 'The nation seems to slouch onward in its uncertain future like some huge inarticulate beast, too much attainted by wounds and ailments to be robust, but too strong and resourceful to succumb.'⁷³ It would survive but would remain deeply flawed.

One of the nation's greatest flaws was the absence of sufficient gun control laws. The issue was mentioned only in passing in both the lecture and in *American Violence*. As Hofstadter explained, 'I'm not going to turn the lecture into a harangue about gun control laws... But I would if I thought it would do any good.'⁷⁴ It was, however, a topic he took up in a separate essay published in *American Heritage*. The nation had been impelled to consider its relationship to guns in light of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Nevertheless, despite the national revulsion, many Americans 'cling with pathetic stubbornness to the notion that the people's right to bear arms is the greatest protection of individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy.' The modest legislative change, in which mail order guns were restricted, was one which Hofstadter noted was, at best, feeble.⁷⁵

As Hofstadter had explained in his lecture on violence, the tradition of the frontier and the belief that popular access to arms was a defence against tyranny, were of central importance to any discussion of guns in American life. However, 'more than anything else, the state of American gun controls is evidence of the failures of federalism.'⁷⁶ The fact that the system of purchase and possession of guns was under the control of local law agencies was both inadequate and intolerable. Yet there seemed little prospect of reform. In accounting for the remarkable reluctance to act at a federal level, Hofstadter attributed the blame firmly to the continued rural influence in American politics. These

⁷³ Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence", 43.

⁷⁴ Hofstadter address at UCLA.

⁷⁵ Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture", *American Heritage*, October 1970
<https://www.americanheritage.com/content/america-gun-culture>.

⁷⁶ Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture"

men had little knowledge or understanding of urban America, and had little desire to make themselves familiar with the issues being faced in the nation's cities. Instead they remained wedded to an image of the rural America of a bygone era in which guns were symbolic of liberty rather than death. The rural values of a significant section of Congress was further strengthened by the political weight of the gun lobby, a group 'as powerful as it is indifferent to the public safety.'⁷⁷ Hofstadter struggled to think what magnitude of catastrophe would be required to elicit meaningful change. His concluding words signified his sense of despair, as he mournfully asked, 'How far must things go?'⁷⁸

In a letter to Harvey Swados after the publication of *American Violence*, Hofstadter reflected on the recent death of his uncle at the age of seventy-five. 'I wd settle for that,' he wrote, 'but I expect to crab my sickish way up to 80 or so, not enjoying it very much either.'⁷⁹ Hofstadter was a self-confessed hypochondriac and his correspondence had often made mention of periods of sickness and ill-health. However, the tone of his descriptions of his state of health appears to change in his letters to Swados from the summer of 1969. In August 1969, he had written, 'I am really not reconciled to living sick, and have in one way or another been so for some time.' Nevertheless, he continued, 'I have gone on writing anyway...and I'm making gestures on a book now known in the family as Hofstadter's monumental folly. A big book.'⁸⁰ The book he was referring to was part of a planned eighteen-year project to write a three-volume history of American political culture from 1750 to the present. After some competition from both Oxford University Press and Atlantic-Little Brown, Knopf agreed a contract with Hofstadter which would pay \$15,000 a year on the agreement that Hofstadter produced a book every six years. The contract was signed on January 9, 1970, two months after Hofstadter had received his diagnosis of leukaemia.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence", 25.

⁷⁸ Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture"

⁷⁹ Hofstadter to Swados, July 18, 1970, HSP Box 31.

⁸⁰ Hofstadter to Swados, August 14, 1969, HSP Box 31.

⁸¹ "Proposal for Three-Volume History", RHP Box 1; Hofstadter to Byron Hollinshead, Oxford University Press, April 24, 1969, RHP Box 4; Peter Davison to Hofstadter, September 1969, RHP Box 2; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 229.

Hofstadter began work on what Alfred Kazin described as 'his greatest dream as a writer', a synthetic history 'accessible not only to students of history...but to the general educated public that reads and makes intellectual use of sophisticated history.'⁸² However, his condition quickly worsened and by August he had ceased work on the chapters and switched his attention to an introduction that would enable publication of the completed sections. The work, as it was published, opened with a gloomy assessment of the nation's early years. Jack Pole noted a 'sadness and sense of cost that pervades Dick's last book,' which he suggested may have reflected his pessimism regarding in his own health.⁸³ Perhaps more likely, the events of the previous years, particularly the persistence of race as an issue, had led him to consider the contradictions inherent in a country that portrayed itself as the model of liberal democracy yet continued to fail those least privileged.

The American settlers of the eighteenth century, Hofstadter wrote, were greeted by 'the fragrance of pine trees' detectable from 60 leagues off shore. It was a vivid reminder of the continued newness of the land despite more than a century of settlement. To those who had fled the ravages of war, persecution and social conflict, the New World must have indeed seemed full of promise. However, this was only part of the story as, whilst 'thousands came to the colonies in search of freedom or plenty and with a reasonably good chance of finding them,' these men were considerably outnumbered by those, both white and black, who entered the country in servitude. At least half of the incoming white Europeans were indentured servants, redemptioners or convicts who commenced life in America without freedom. As Hofstadter demonstrated, 'few could have expected much from American life and those who did were often disappointed.' Of those who went on to gain their freedom, the number who were able to prosper was minimal. The human costs of white indenture, often lost in the story of European migration, could not be ignored when fully contemplating 'what historians lightly refer to as the American experiment.'⁸⁴

⁸² Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 15; Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), viii.

⁸³ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 230.

⁸⁴ Hofstadter, *America at 1750*, xi, 64, 65.

With the examination of the conditions for white servants, Hofstadter warned, 'we have only begun to taste the anguish of the American experience.' The largest stream of immigration into the colonies was that of black slaves, and their experience of the journey alone was outside 'the power of the human imagination to picture.' For those who had 'endured the unendurable' the demands of life on the plantation were relentless and without reward. Faced with white owners who considered them to be less than human there were no bounds to the misery that might be inflicted upon them. The system of slavery was based on the savagery of exploitation and it established an institutional framework for the relationship between the races that would have a lasting impact on American civilization. Whilst the framework would be dismantled, the frame of mind prevailed. The idea of 'coexistence on terms of equality or near-equality became a monstrous, demonic, haunting apocalyptic image.' It was an image that some Americans were still unable, or unwilling, to relinquish.⁸⁵

As Elkins and McKittrick identified, whilst the first half of Hofstadter's book painted a dark portrait of the nation, the second half 'gave an impression of recovery.'⁸⁶ For those fortunate enough to have arrived with their freedom, they found a society that was preponderantly middle-class. As a British official observed in 1760, 'all mortifying distinctions of rank are lost in common equality; and...the ways of wealth and preferment are alike open to all men.' Those who commenced life in the lower classes shared the aspirations of the middle class and were likely to realise their aspirations within their lifetime. Distinctively, it was a middle-class rural society, and the abundance of free land was central to the creation of opportunities for economic betterment. There were, of course, inequalities of wealth, particularly evident in the Southern states, but even here there was a minimum level of material comfort that almost all could attain. This was the America that would not only attract countless numbers of immigrants in the following decades and centuries, but would determine the nation's image of itself.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid., 65, 82, 93, 115.

⁸⁶ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter; A Progress" in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (eds), *The Hofstadter Aegis* (New York: Borzoi, 1974), 364.

⁸⁷ Hofstadter, *America at 1750*, 141.

The final three chapters covered topics which Hofstadter had considered in previous works; the history of religion in America. Unlike those earlier works, Hofstadter chose not to concentrate on the impact of religion on academic freedom, or its relationship to anti-intellectualism. Instead, he presented a broader and somewhat more positive picture of the influence of religion on the political direction of the nation. Unlike the countries of the Old World, America lacked an established church capable of imposing unity across the country. These peculiar circumstances created an environment that, by necessity, aided the growth of religious freedom. Whilst it was true that the nation had 'stumbled into virtue' rather than arriving there through reasoning and principle, the co-existence of competing sects helped establish a culture of tolerance. This movement was further strengthened by the Great Awakening which saw further splits in the churches and lead to even greater individual involvement and choice in religious life. The period of revivalism ended 'by establishing more firmly than ever the plurality of forces that made toleration, and finally full religious liberty, the most amenable solution for civic life.' Most importantly, the democratic nature of American religion and the acceptance of the need for comity, set the framework for the nation's political culture.⁸⁸

It was at this point that Hofstadter's work finished. His section on the colonial elites remained unfinished and those on colonial politics and the imperial wars had not been started. He had continued to work into the Fall of 1970, in what H. Stuart Hughes described as 'a desperate effort to keep alive.' However, whilst his will to write never faded, his body eventually failed him. He died, as his friends described, 'in the midst of things,' on October 24, 1970 in Mount Sinai Hospital, his manuscript still by his bedside.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Hofstadter, *America at 1750*, 188, 292.

⁸⁹ H. Stuart Hughes, "Richard Hofstadter Project", interview, December 12, 1972, Oral History Office, Columbia University; Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter", 367.

Conclusion

Hofstadter's death, at the tragically young age of 54, was mourned across the nation. As Irving Howe described, it was 'felt as a tragic loss, a harsh personal blow, not only by those who had been close to him,' but 'throughout the country.'¹ In the weeks following, Beatrice received hundreds of letters of condolences from friends, colleagues, former students and members of the general public who had been moved by Hofstadter's work. President Nixon wrote personally to express the sorrow of the American people and a eulogy was given by William F. Ryan in the House of Representatives.² Peter Gay would later remark that Hofstadter's death had come at a time when 'he was at the height of his powers but not of his influence,' but at the time the outpouring of sentiment reflected the impact of a life and career that had touched countless numbers over the preceding decades.³

Amongst the many obituaries, there was one that prompted considerable reaction. Alden Whitman's obituary in the *New York Times* was, in the words of Dorothy Zinberg, 'an outrage'.⁴ In relying heavily on Richard Kostelanetz's biographical essay on Hofstadter, Whitman had painted a picture of Hofstadter which was greatly at odds with those who knew him personally. In a direct quotation from Kostelanetz, Whitman wrote that Hofstadter was a 'blue-eyed, graying, almost nondescript man' who was known for his 'regular habits, scrupulous discipline and insulated temperament'.⁵ The obituary prompted several angry letters to both the editor and Whitman, one of which, from Lionel Trilling, was printed in the November 5th edition of the newspaper. Trilling dismissed Whitman's portrayal and declared Hofstadter to be 'one of the most clearly

¹ Irving Howe, "Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," *Dissent*, February 1971, 10.

² Richard Nixon to Beatrice Hofstadter, October 27, 1970; William F. Ryan to Beatrice Hofstadter, November 24, 1970, both RHP Box 19 Biographical Material; Congressional Record, November 16, 1970.

³ Peter Gay, "Richard Hofstadter," biographical sketch sent to Beatrice Hofstadter, May 22, 1978, RHP SUNY, Box1, Folder 5.

⁴ Dorothy Zinberg to Alden Whitman, October 28, 1970, RHP Box 19.

⁵ Alden Whitman, "Richard Hofstadter, Pulitzer Historian, 54, Dies," *New York Times*, October 25, 1970, 92.

defined persons I have ever known...an enchanting companion, often memorably funny.' He was a man of 'remarkable...grace and charm and luminosity of spirit.'⁶

The disparity between Kostelanetz's portrait and the impressions of Hofstadter's close friends reveals more than a simple misreading of character. As C. Vann Woodward explained in his eulogy at the memorial service, Hofstadter was 'an intensely private man' who 'stubbornly resisted public appearances.'⁷ Alfred Kazin, with whom he had been very close at the outset of his career, similarly told an interviewer that Hofstadter was 'a very retiring man. That's a very important thing to understand about him.'⁸ This shyness, and discomfort in public had been with him from his high school days, and continued throughout his career. He rejected appeals to appear on television, avoided large conferences and conventions and was known to take little joy in the delivery of lectures. It was, therefore, inevitable that some would find him aloof and insular. Those 'unusual qualities of mind and spirit' that Woodward learned to understand, 'were not always readily apparent' to those with whom he was not close.⁹

As David Brown suggests, Hofstadter's decision to remain on the margins and to take the role of intellectual outsider may have been, in some part, a result of his natural reserve.¹⁰ His diffidence was accompanied by a personal ambivalence that he found troublesome in his early years. Nevertheless, in his writing he was able to make a positive virtue of his reluctance to accept certainty where none existed. As he once explained to an undergraduate, 'I have been disturbed to find that many historians do not understand ambiguity and have difficulties in seeing ambiguities.'¹¹ It was this sense of ambiguity which was of central importance for Hofstadter and his native scepticism of simple formulations, both historical and political, are key to an understanding of both his life and work.

⁶ Lionel Trilling, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, November 5, 1970.

⁷ C. Vann Woodward, "Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 1970, 10.

⁸ Alfred Kazin, *Richard Hofstadter Project*, OHRO.

⁹ Woodward, "Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," 10.

¹⁰ David Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 236.

¹¹ Hofstadter to William Novak, November 15, 1970, RHP Uncatalogued Correspondence Box 6.

Hofstadter's work was characterized by a desire to challenge accepted truths, and his greatest success was in shining new light on subjects that had long resided in the dark corners of historical orthodoxy. Yet, he had little desire that his own interpretations become equally fixed and bemoaned the fact that those who read his work often dismissed his entreaty that it be considered as a prelude to discussion rather than a final judgement.¹² As Woodward noted, 'he insisted upon "a certain tentativeness" about his writing' and 'never became the prisoner of his ideas.'¹³ He was fully aware of the relativity of his own work and was under no illusions that the conclusions he had reached would be challenged. Indeed, it was essential that this was so. Whilst the pursuit of truth must be a central goal, experience had taught that a truth possessed gives only fleeting satisfaction. Hofstadter summed up his sense of the contingency of truth when he declared, 'Truth captured loses its glamor, truths long known and widely believed have a way of turning false with time; easy truths are a bore, and too many of them become half-truths.' It was the pursuit which was of central importance and the perpetual 'quest for new uncertainties' provided a reward that the transient nature of truth could not.¹⁴ It was the very absence of certainty that allowed Hofstadter to write with a sense of freedom that ensured his work was both original and thought-provoking.

Hofstadter's aversion to fixed ideas had rendered him ill-suited to political radicalism. Nevertheless, he had not remained politically passive. He had marched in support of civil rights, been a vocal critic of political extremism, and had spoken out 'against brutish intolerance wherever it appeared.'¹⁵ On such issues, there could be no ambiguity. However, he always retained a preference for a position on the periphery of the contemporary political debate. Throughout his career, his primary means of political engagement was through his studies of the past. Those who criticised Hofstadter's work towards the end of his career saw it to be a barely veiled defence of the status quo and a rejection of the validity of radical dissent. The assertion was that Hofstadter, like many of his peers, had forsaken the radicalism of his youth for a neo-

¹² David Hawke, "Interview: Richard Hofstadter," 136.

¹³ C. Vann Woodward, "Richard Hofstadter," *American Historical Review*, 76 (June 1971), 959.

¹⁴ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 30.

¹⁵ Fritz Stern, "In Memoriam: Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 29, 1970, 6.

conservative position. Whilst it cannot be doubted that Hofstadter's political views, and his vision of the past altered in reaction to the changing times, it cannot be understood as a simply political trajectory. Indeed, at the core of Hofstadter's work there was a remarkable consistency. His commitment to freedom of thought and concern for the fragility of the life of the mind are present from the beginning of his career. Whilst the direction and force of the threat changed through time, Hofstadter remained determined in his defence.

Gay has suggested that Hofstadter's work was 'pervaded by two pairs of tensions: he was a writer and scholar, engaged polemicist and detached professional.' These tensions, he contends, were expressed in 'a certain ambivalence towards the issues of his day.'¹⁶ However, I would argue that Hofstadter's ambivalence was not the expression of competing visions of his role. Rather, his scholarship was both a reflection of his personal ambivalence and a medium through which he could locate his own position and find a voice in the wider political debate. The work was not simply one of historical narrative but also of self-narrative. As Woodward described, Hofstadter's 'work was...something transcending the flesh and something distinctly of the spirit.'¹⁷ In this respect, the writing of history had a personal purpose beyond the mere professional. Hofstadter's comment within his research notes for *The Progressive Historians* summed up his own conception of the personal relationship to his work: 'let us not forget history as self-criticism, the transcendence as well as the realization of the self.'¹⁸

The Foucauldian concept of writing as an essential element in 'caring for the self' is complicated when discussing the role of the historian. The historian's self-narrative must, of course, be considered in relation to the historical selves of whom he writes. David Harlan wrote of Perry Miller that his work 'stands as a powerful reminder that at its best American history is a conversation with the dead about what we should value and how we should live.'¹⁹ This idea of the writing of history as one of discourse

¹⁶ Gay, "Richard Hofstadter."

¹⁷ Woodward, "Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970," 11.

¹⁸ Hofstadter, "Notes on *The Progressive Historians*," RHP SUNY, Box 1, Folder 11.

¹⁹ David Craig Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

between past and present is central to the historical profession. However, as Kierkegaard pointed out, whilst 'life must be understood backwards...it must be lived forwards.'²⁰ In writing, the historian creates a narrative that acts upon an audience in the future in addition to fulfilling a role in self-narrative in the present. Hofstadter was acutely aware of the danger, as he had identified in the work of Beard, of an excessive present-mindedness which sought to translate history into recommendations for the future. The desire to write history which was relevant must be balanced by an equal determination to avoid a dogmatic stand.²¹ The role of the historian was not to provide answers, but in posing questions that might provoke further thought.

Richard Rorty made a similar point when considering Hans-Georg Gadamer's substitution of edification, or self-formation, for knowledge as the central goal of thinking. The aim of edifying philosophy, Rorty suggested, was that of 'the performance of the social function which [John] Dewey called "breaking the crust of convention," and, in doing so, preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself.'²² It was not the discovery of truth but the creation of new conversations which was the essence of edification. Hofstadter dedicated his career to the safeguarding of intellectual freedom and the widening of the debate in both the political and historical fields. His defence of pluralism, which some considered to be motivated by a fear of dissent was, in many ways, quite the opposite. It was his distaste for absolutism and the demands for conformity that accompanied ideological politics that was at the root of his defence. The health of American society, and indeed that of the historical profession, was guaranteed only when a plurality of voices were engaged in conversation. For many, Hofstadter's own voice was a vital one and one that was sorely missed. As a friend wrote after his death, 'At a time when there are so few voices of sanity left in the world, it hurts cruelly to lose one on whom we relied so heavily and so often.'²³ Whilst the troubled times through which he lived prompted many to seek solace in simple solutions, Hofstadter drew attention to the complexity and ambiguity of both the past

1997), xviii.

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Living Thoughts Of Kierkegaard*, 3.

²¹ Hawke, "Interview," 136.

²² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979; Princeton: Princeton University, 1981), 379.

²³ Edward and Helen Morgan to Beatrice Hofstadter, October 26, 1970, RHP Box 18.

and present. In his determination to avoid binding conclusions, to add fresh perspectives to the historical record, and to challenge certainty, Hofstadter produced a body of work that exemplified the edifying influence of historical writing. As several of his friends commented, his life and work were characterised by a luminosity.²⁴ Whilst he did not plot the route, he provided a light that others might find their way out of the darkness. The frequent invocation of his work in contemporary political discourse suggests that he continues to provide illumination.

²⁴ Carl Hovde, "Professor Richard F. Hofstadter In Memoriam," Draft eulogy, October 29, 1970, RHP Box 18; Howe, "Richard Hofstadter," 10

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