

A MEASURE OF DETACHMENT: RICHARD HOFSTADTER AND THE PROGRESSIVE HISTORIANS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Richard Hofstadter's innovations in historical method arose as a critical response to the Progressive historians, particularly to Charles Beard. Hofstadter's first two books were demonstrations of the inadequacy of Progressive methodology, while his third book (the Age of Reform) showed the potential of his new way of writing history.

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CHAPTER ONE
A MEASURE OF DETACHMENT

Great thinkers often spend their early years in rebellion against the teachers from whom they have learned the most. Freud would say they live out a form of the Oedipal archetype, that son must murder his father at least a little bit if he is ever to become his own man. Richard Hofstadter described himself as a product of America's reform tradition and identified the Progressive historian Charles Beard as his most important influence. And yet his creation of a new way of doing history emerged as a critical response to Progressive historiography and particularly to Beard.

Reading Beard's Rise of American Civilization, one is struck by its tone of patriotic pride, not a traditional reverence towards the Framers or the hardy Anglo-Saxon pioneers who planted the seeds of democracy, but a feeling of satisfaction that America had finally outgrown its absurd belief that the founding generation's choices embodied an eternal political wisdom.¹ Since its earliest days, said Beard, America was loyal to a Hamiltonian dream of *laissez-faire*, a myth that a beneficent and egalitarian social order would arise organically, if only the state would leave ordinary people alone while it fostered the interests of capital. America had been slow to grasp that for nearly everyone, the promise of entrepreneurial success had always vastly exceeded the possibility of its attainment. But with the closing of the frontier and the rise of

¹ Beard's iconoclastic work An Economic Interpretation of the Origin of the Constitution (1913) was a part of this awakening. Beard ridiculed the "Teutonic" seed theory of George Bancroft, the idea that America's social order came from a natural proclivity to democracy of a "specially gifted race" and that Constitution was "the full fruition of their political genius" (p. 3). Like the muckraker he was, Beard dispensed with these rationalizations and gave us the "realistic" view: "our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as 'the whole people' but of a group of economic interests which expected beneficial results from its adoption" (p. 17).

industrialization, the nation had finally seen that *laissez-faire* was the freedom of the wolf to roam freely among the sheep. There was a “profound movement of social forces that finally breached the philosophy of ‘Let us alone’.”² “Science” overturned the dogmatism of Adam Smith’s Natural Law, “challenging the intellectual patterns handed down from the age of the stagecoach.”³ Democrats and Republicans, North and South, East and West: all agreed that regulation was not an impediment to progress but its precondition. “The system of acquisition was calling into being its own antithesis—forces that challenged its authority and called into question and required a reconsideration of its laws and ethics.”⁴

The name of this antithesis was Progressivism. And how much these Progressives had achieved! Compensation for injured workers, protection of “national capital” in the form of public lands and resources, greater liberty for women, the right of workers to strike and unionize, a reformed civil service, direct primaries, the “Australian” secret ballot—all these were evidence that the “plutocracy was being curbed,” that “the sacred rights of property owners could be invaded with the object of compelling them to carry the burden of their own social wreckage.”⁵

To Hofstadter, Beard had debunked one dream only to replace it with another. He gave Beard credit for dispelling the aura of sanctity around the Framers. He acknowledged that Beard’s heresy opened the way for Oliver Wendell Holmes’ critique of legal formalism and for the new, pragmatic interpretations of the Constitution that made Progressive reform possible.⁶ He saw

² Beard, Charles and Mary. [The Rise of American Civilization](#), p. 583.

³ Beard, Charles and Mary. [The Rise of American Civilization](#), p. 538.

⁴ Beard, Charles and Mary. [The Rise of American Civilization](#), p. 544.

⁵ Beard, Charles and Mary. [The Rise of American Civilization](#), p. 542.

⁶ [The Progressive Historians](#), p. 213. Hofstadter notes that Holmes disliked Beard’s book, which he referred to as “humbug”. For Holmes, as for Hofstadter, the insinuation that greed was the Framers’ principal motive was a gross simplification.

the accomplishments of the Progressive era, including Beard's work, as great leaps forward. But to say, as Beard did, that "let it be" had been replaced by a widespread desire for "social democracy" was a vast exaggeration. Beard had indeed given us "relief from the revelation granted by God to Alexander Hamilton in 1787," but was unable to subject his own synthesis to the same critical scrutiny. He, too, saw the nation he wanted to see. His moral vision of a regenerative, reforming America blinded him to a nation that was unwilling to give up its traditional bourgeoisie dreams.

Hofstadter would play therapist to this Beardian fantasy. He never spoke of Beard with condemnation or reproof. But there is an unmistakable sense that to him, Beard had got it all wrong. He had let his utopian dreams taint his understanding of America's past and inflate his hopes for its future. No therapist is the enemy of fantasy.⁷ Dreams tie life together, they give sense and unity to its parts, and they give us hope. Like a Leibnizian theodicy, they reconcile human iniquity with our need to see the world as fundamentally good. But sometimes these fantasies stray into delusion and interfere with life. They foster magical thinking and the inevitable disappointments which follow once one sees that the magic does not work. Beard and the rest of the Progressive historians saw an America molting off its Hamiltonian myths, as a caterpillar sloughs its cocoon to become a butterfly. For Hofstadter, the cocoon was still very much intact.

⁷ Like Hofstadter, I use the terms "dream," "myth," and "fantasy" interchangeably but not pejoratively. I believe I follow his usage by treating "delusion" as having a genuinely negative connotation, not because delusions are fictional but rather because they cause harm to those who hold them. "A myth," wrote Hofstadter in The Age of Reform, "is not an idea that is simply false but rather one that so effectively embodies men's values that it profoundly influences their way of perceiving reality and hence their behavior" (p. 24). There is a great overlap, if not outright coextensionality, between myth and ideology. By the time he wrote Age of Reform, Hofstadter had read Karl Mannheim and was ready to discuss ideology with Mannheim's analytic vocabulary. But he had been looking at ideology in Mannheim's way for a long time already. The bootstrapping dream of bourgeoisie liberalism was one sort of myth, and the Progressive belief that this consensus was waning was another. Challenging the latter myth, I argue, was the chief task of Hofstadter's first two books.

He saw no great turning away from *laissez-faire* capitalism, no long struggle between the rich and the poor culminating in the victories of the Progressive era, no watershed moment when America had woken to a sense of communal responsibility. There had been labor violence but never a self-conscious working class. There had been radicals and dissenters, but not many, and those few had been easily marginalized. In terms of material power and productivity, the rise of American industrial capitalism had been flourishing success. "Societies that are in such good working order," Hofstadter wrote, "have a kind of mute organic consistency. They do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements. Such ideas may appear, but they are slowly and persistently insulated, as an oyster deposits nacre around an irritant."⁸ Contrary to the paranoid view⁹ of Progressives like Beard, this insulation was not the fruit of some malevolent, plutocratic design. Dissenters were marginal figures because there was so little support for their views among the middle and working class. Most Americans respected successful capitalists. They did not struggle against the system but rather fought to join its upper ranks. Support for capitalism was a constant in American history, a value system shared by the majority in all social classes in all historical periods. Hofstadter called this unwavering support for bourgeois liberalism the American consensus. By insisting that consensus, not conflict, was the leading characteristic of America's past, Hofstadter broke sharply with Progressive historiography, and thus also with his generation's intellectual Left.¹⁰

⁸ American Political Tradition, p. ix.

⁹ In The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Hofstadter infamously labeled the New Right as practitioners of the "paranoid style." What is less appreciated, but important for grasping his response to Progressive historiography, is that he saw the Progressives (and the Populists) as practicing their own form of pathological, delusional, demonizing politics. This comes out quite clearly in his treatment of these movements in The Age of Reform.

¹⁰ I use the terminology of "Left" and "Right" because Hofstadter did. He never offered rigorous definitions of these notoriously amorphous concepts, beyond calling the Left "the side of popular causes and reform," (Age of Reform, p. 9) and the Right the "side devoted to property and less given to popular enthusiasms and democratic professions" (Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. 9). Hofstadter was aware of the limitations of this dualism—its inadequacy as a descriptor of American political conflict is a simple corollary of the consensus thesis—but he nonetheless identified himself as a member of the Left.

In each of Hofstadter's first three books (Social Darwinism in American Thought, The American Political Tradition and The Age of Reform), he describes the reform era (1890 to the New Deal) as a continuation of the *laissez-faire* tradition. Progressive presidents like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had been social and economic conservatives. Like their Progressive constituents, they had no wish to challenge consensus, only to address new social forces like labor unions and trusts that they saw as threats to middle class opportunity. Hofstadter thought the New Deal was different from the reform movements—it had no animus towards big business and no interest in using the state as a moralizing force—but it, too, stood firmly within the American consensus. FDR was not worried that capitalism produced injustice or inequities that the state had a moral obligation to rectify. His sole, pragmatic wish was to restore the economy to its proper function and the minimal modifications he made to *laissez-faire* were in service to that end.

Only with the post-war rise of what Hofstadter called “Modern Liberalism” was there a true rejection of consensus.¹¹ For the Modern Liberal, FDR's innovations were not just economic tinkering, but the fulfillment of long-neglected moral obligations. The state had a duty to effect distributive justice and FDR's progressive taxation and generous social spending were important, if insufficient, steps towards that end. The political history of post-WWII America took the form

“I have been critical of the Populist-Progressive tradition...but not hostile, for I am criticizing largely from within. The tradition of Progressive reform is the one upon which I was reared, and upon which my political sentiments were formed.” Age of Reform, p. 12.

¹¹ Hofstadter is enigmatic about who these “Modern Liberals” were. He mentions a few names briefly—John W. Hicks, C. Vann Woodward—but offers only a cursory response to their work. One cannot deny that the phrase is a shibboleth, not a label these writers used to describe themselves, but one which, in Hofstadter's usage, merely designates them as “outside,” distinct from both the Progressives and from the classical American consensus. Where the Progressives had put too much faith in equalitarian rhetoric from figures like Jackson or Jefferson, and thus missed the unanimity of consensus, Modern Liberals had put too much faith in the same sort of rhetoric coming from the Progressives themselves, mistaking the class-consciousness of historians like Beard as indicative of the radicalism of the Progressive movement as a whole. Perhaps this label just reified a group which Hofstadter needed for rhetorical purposes, as a foil for his far more conservative take on the reform period.

of a perennial conflict between Modern Liberals and those who remained loyal to *laissez-faire*. The Democrats became the avatar of Modern Liberalism, while the Republicans represented the dream of a return to the classical liberalism of Adam Smith. Success in the New Deal and WWII and the failure of traditional consensus to cope with the Great Depression gave the Modern Liberal ascendance in the immediate post war era, but Hofstadter saw that dominance eroding. McCarthyism and the rise of the Goldwater New Right signaled the resurgence of the original consensus. Consensus was not just an economic system, it was a cluster of deeply held myths, an idealized vision of America in which people were self-reliant and free. To many if not most Americans, Modern Liberalism seemed like an attack on those values. The resurgence of consensus in the form of the new, Goldwater Right was thus emotionally and psychologically inevitable.

In chapters one and two of this essay, I show how Hofstadter's first two books challenged Progressive delusions. In Social Darwinism, Hofstadter rejected the stereotypical assumption that Darwinism was just a convenient justification for the cupidity of the robber barons. It was that, but it was also a key component of Progressivism, particularly in the eugenics movement and in the populist, racial imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt. The Progressive historians saw ideas like Darwinism as tools used by rich against the poor. Hofstadter showed that every political group of consequence bought into the predatory assumptions that were implicit in capitalism, just as each used Darwinism to legitimate their various forms of predation. Social Darwinism was just capitalism with a thin veneer of legitimacy in Natural Law. It was widely accepted because it sanctified what most people already believed.

The story of American Darwinism was a clear foreshadowing of the consensus thesis in Hofstadter's next book, The American Political Tradition. According to that thesis, there was no long contest of capital against labor, but a shared entrepreneurial culture in which all sides

subscribed to the same, bootstrapping vision of success. The Progressive historians were mistaken when they looked at American history and saw periodic revolts against the owner class. Some moments of reform were mere charades (Theodore Roosevelt's purported opposition to the trusts, for example), but most were episodes of what Hofstadter called entrepreneurial radicalism (e.g., Jacksonian opposition to the Bank of the United States), movements on the part of one segment of the population to enlarge its business opportunities at the expense of some other part. To be sure, these movements cloaked themselves in equalitarian rhetoric, but none brought significant change or challenge to the capitalist system. The economic radicalism that Beard had perceived simply did not exist. The Progressive era's meager reforms preserved capitalism by blunting some of its worst abuses, but should not be mistaken for steps on the way to democratic socialism.

Hofstadter's third book, the subject of my third chapter, completes the architectonic of his first two. Hofstadter never denied the importance of conflict in American history, only the Progressive view that this conflict was about economics. The consensus thesis was like the frame of a picture. It excluded the relevance of class conflict to focus attention on other kinds of contests, like those over status, deference, respect, cultural primacy and entrepreneurial opportunity. Hofstadter believed that the Progressive conflict model was a procrustean frame which obscured the uniqueness of a historical moment by subsuming it into the perennial struggle of "the People" against "the Interests." The Age of Reform was a demonstration of how a historian could recapture that uniqueness. His first two books were largely destructive, a sustained critique of Progressive delusions about America's past. His third book was constructive. It was his proof by example that his new historical methodology could do a better job of revealing the complexities and ambiguities of the American past.

Modern Liberals projected their own values onto history. Contrary to their belief, the reformers were not only economically conservative, falling firmly within the traditional American consensus, they were also prone to the very sorts of illiberalism—racism, nativism, anti-intellectualism, paranoia towards state power—that the modern Left associated with right wing extremists like McCarthy.¹² The Age of Reform asked the Modern Left to see itself in its particularity, to recognize the vast differences between itself and its purported predecessors in the reform era and in the New Deal. But it also asked Modern Liberalism to see itself as the inheritor of the less savory aspects of the Progressive tradition. There was not much difference, Hofstadter seemed to suggest, between the Progressives' blithe ignorance of their own cultural aggression toward the immigrant communities of the cities, and the Modern Liberal's tendency to dismiss adherents of the traditional consensus as hicks or simpletons. For Hofstadter, the Modern Liberal represented the rejection of the non-ideological, non-moralizing character of the New Deal and a return to the worst aspects of Progressivism, an excessive faith in the moral function of the state and a complacent sense of moral superiority. As he did with the Progressive historians in his first two books, Hofstadter's aim in The Age of Reform was not to demean Modern Liberals, whose motives he thought to be good, but to urge them towards a more honest self-awareness and a greater sense of humility.

Why offer this picture of American historiography? Why treat Modern Liberals as naïve utopians because of their break with America's traditional economic and social values? Why treat them as delusional in the way they looked back on the Progressive era? And why, for that matter, besmirch the memory of the Progressive historians themselves, by treating their work as so much wishful thinking? Was Hofstadter a crypto-conservative? A self-hating Modern Liberal? What policies, what political party did he serve?

¹² Age of Reform, p. 20-21.

To characterize Hofstadter's politics, I confess, is no easy task. He was indeed critical of the Left, particularly in this early phase of his career, but that did not mean he was a conservative. He wanted the Left to acknowledge its own forms of illiberalism and its sanctimonious air of moral superiority, but he frankly acknowledged his own reformist roots and his deep debts to Marx. In his later career, particularly in The Paranoid Style, he subjected the Right to the same withering scrutiny he had previously trained on the Left. He was not a political moderate, not at some midpoint between the policy goals of the two parties or the sentiments of the political Right and Left. He never identified with a political party, and to his credit, never thought he could offer replacements for the myths he challenged. He offered no endorsements of policies or politicians. And yet it would be a mistake to call his work apolitical.¹³ There are inevitable political implications to a critical analysis of a nation's myths. But what was the direction of these implications? To see his project as a Leftist challenge to power is simplistic. To see it as a Rightist legitimation of power is equally blunt. Perhaps the best way to put it is to say that Hofstadter aimed to move beyond dualisms, and that the clearest political implication of his work is an injunction to eschew dichotomous thinking. But what did that mean? How does one practice a politics of ambiguity?

Hofstadter wanted the Left to acknowledge its bastards. To see a vigorous tradition of economic radicalism in the United States, or deny the Populist parentage of McCarthyism, or to view the Progressives as warriors against injustice rather than its occasional perpetrators, was to

¹³ I am grateful to Harvey Neptune for helping me to see this point. Neptune suggests an analogy between Hofstadter's project and post-colonial historiography. Both focus on the way subaltern peoples (the American working class, the colonized native) accept the conceptual frame of the ruling class (the wealthy, the colonizers) even if they have the political power, whether from democratic elections or armed revolution, to reject that frame. To bring the frame's implicit assumptions into awareness is an intrinsically political project. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot says, "the ultimate challenge to power is the exposition of its invisible roots." Silencing the Past. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p. xix. The difficulty in classing Hofstadter with the post-colonial historians is that he is not *just* offering a challenge to power, but is also attuned to the benefits of America's political myths. This, I believe, is what makes the political implications of his work so ambiguous.

choose flattering delusions over reality. Like a therapist who forces a patient to confront an unhealthy fiction, Hofstadter was not the enemy of the Left but of its self-deceptions. Alan Brinkley described Hofstadter as a “discontented liberal” but “discontent,” with its connotations of alienation and anger, does not strike the right note. “At their best,” Hofstadter wrote, “interpretive historians have gone to the past with some passionate concern about the future; and somehow—the examples of Tocqueville and Henry Adams might encourage us—they have produced from the inner tensions of their minds an equipoise that enables them to superimpose upon their commitment a measure of detachment about the past.”¹⁴

The concluding chapter of Anti-Intellectualism in American Life is a long meditation on the role of the public intellectual which illuminates Hofstadter’s ideal of historical detachment. He was suspicious of what he called the “conformity of alienation,” in which the intellectual proves that he has not been co-opted by withdrawing into the hip irony of the Beatniks or the nihilism of a Norman Mailer.¹⁵ Historians of the Left are prone to believe that “alienation is the only appropriate and honorable stance for them to take,” that “whenever they become absorbed into the accredited institutions of society they not only lose their traditional rebelliousness, but to one extent or another, cease to function as intellectuals.”¹⁶ For Hofstadter, this automatic non-conformity might serve to debunk an exploitative fiction, but it also obscured the full, structural complexity of political myth. Myths exploit but they also unify. They are tools of predation *and* the glue that holds a disparate people together.

Hofstadter analyzed America’s political myths with a *measured* detachment, a point of equipoise between the extremes of alienation and conformity, a place sufficiently removed to give him clarity of insight, but not so far as to make his work merely critical or destructive.

¹⁴ Progressive Historians, p. 465.

¹⁵ Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, p. 422.

¹⁶ Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, p. 397.

Hofstadter sought this place of detachment to free his treatment of myth from the two great limitations he found in Beard. Hofstadter gave Beard enormous credit (perhaps too much) for being the first sociologist of American political ideas. But he believed Beard had made two mistakes. He used history to further his aspirations for social change, which gave his work the distorting tinge of propaganda, and he structured his narrative using the economic conflict model, which like all stories of simple antagonism, closed off possibilities of ambiguity and irony that could have given his writing more texture and depth.

Detachment is the antithesis of this moral posture and this narrative form. It is an attitude of studied indifference and deliberate emotional distance, often expressed as a mordant, cynical wit. It is a kind of story telling with no heroes and no villains, no conflict and hence no climax or moral. Beard and the other Progressives were typically American in their anti-intellectualism, convinced that they could “yank Miss Beautiful Letters out of the sphere of the higher verbal hokum and set her in the way that leads to contact with pulsing reality.”¹⁷ They saw ambiguity, irony, and even humor, as foppish affectation, and congratulated themselves for having put history back in touch with the real, just as “realistic” writers like Frank Norris or Jack London had taken literature out of aristocratic drawing-rooms and given it back to the people. Detachment, for Hofstadter, is a form of intellectual counter-revolution, a desire to recapture the resources of ambiguity that the Progressives had scorned. For Hofstadter, the Progressives were well meaning philistines, unable to understand the value of what they dismissed. In Henry James, for example, Parrington saw “a man for whom life was a matter of nerves.” James “fled from reality” and became a “pilgrim to shrines other than those of his native land,” a fatal mistake, since it is “unhealthy for the artist to turn cosmopolitan.” James was never a realist, but a “self-

¹⁷ This was Beard’s admiring comment on Parrington’s Main Currents of American Thought. Progressive Historians, p. 392.

deceived romantic, the last subtle expression of the genteel.”¹⁸ For Hofstadter, this was Parrington “at his worst, writing about a major writer in whom his interest was relatively casual, about whom he could not command enough detachment even to see the necessity of being fair.” And yet Parrington, without intending to, raised a valuable question: “how does one preserve that energetic indignation which makes social protest possible, without succumbing to a certain puritanism about beauty and pleasure, or to a raw political sociology that resists everything rare and individual?” Hofstadter defined himself in opposition the vices he found in Beard and Parrington. He would welcome what was rare and individual and embrace the ambiguous and ironic. He would recapture complexity by bringing to history some of what Henry James had brought to literature, a sense of “distress about the doings of the plutocrats,” balanced by an equal disdain for the “vulgarisms of democracy.”¹⁹

One sees this posture of balanced detachment throughout Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, but especially in Hofstadter’s treatment of American education. On the one side, the Progressives had brought basic education to the poor to a degree that was unprecedented in American history. But a corollary to its democratic spirit was that it saw the life of the mind as valueless and rejected it in favor of a crass utilitarianism in which monetary reward was the only valid goal of learning. Like anti-intellectualism itself, the failures of education were symptoms of America’s egalitarian and democratic culture. They were not *just* another expression of philistinism, but the product of a wholly reasonable contempt for the aristocratic tendency to treat education as a class marker and hence to dismiss practical learning as crass. One sees this measured ambiguity again in his treatment of the Beatniks. On the one hand the Beatniks embodied the quintessential American values of free expression and the right of individuals to

¹⁸ Progressive Historians, p. 394.

¹⁹ Progressive Historians, p. 393.

define their own path of self-realization. On the other, listening to the “uninhibited syntax” of Jack Kerouac, one feels audience to “the child-indulgent propensities of the lunatic fringe of progressive education... to an anti-intellectualism so bitter that it makes the ordinary American’s hatred of eggheads seem positively benign.”²⁰

This measured detachment is most evident in the way Hofstadter treats the sustaining myths of capitalism, like the bootstrapper’s unlikely dreams of wealth, or the absurd assumption that government intervention can only exacerbate inequality by harming the ‘natural’ equality of untrammelled entrepreneurial competition. The alienated intellectual sees these only as the control mechanisms of the ruling class. Hofstadter agreed that consensus was exploitative, and it is this that his Left-leaning critics seized upon when they saw him as an ally. But he also saw it as crucial component of America’s remarkably placid political history, one marked, with the obvious exception of the Civil War, by its peaceful transfer of power through democratic election, its absence of interregional strife, and its freedom from the bitter class conflicts of European politics. This is the dimension fastened upon by critics who wish to put Hofstadter on the political Right. Both sides make the same interpretive mistake. Neither sees Hofstadter’s sense of detachment, so neither sees the ambiguous political implications of his work.

Critics on the Left had ample reason to see Hofstadter as a kindred spirit. He said The American Political Tradition was “a product of the social criticism of the 1930’s, a book in which the American political tradition is seen from a vantage point well to the Left.”²¹ In The Progressive Historians he again acknowledged this debt: “my assertion of consensus history in 1948 had its sources in the Marxism of the 1930’s.”²² In America’s “great” men, observed Daniel Joseph Singal, Hofstadter “found in the main a record of unremitting opportunism. The only

²⁰ Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, p. 421.

²¹ Hofstadter, Richard. 1967 Preface to The American Political Tradition, p. xxi.

²² Progressive Historians, p. 452.

social goal these men shared was to bolster bourgeois capitalism, to allow the middle classes to gorge themselves at the trough... The political conflicts that did occur, he told us, were essentially charades, since no significant beliefs or issues were at stake. Hofstadter found consensus only to condemn it in the most acid terms."²³ Consensus was connected to the Marxist notion of false consciousness. America's entrepreneurial culture, shared by rich and poor alike, made the poor willing participants in their own exploitation. Consensus, said T.J. Jackson Lears, was a hegemonic idea, a cultural ideal in which the only "real" American was the independent bootstrapper, lifting himself from poverty through hard work and self-discipline.²⁴ Since this ideal saw inequality in wealth as the natural result of differences in virtue, and gave no ameliorative role to the state, consensus did indeed function in the classic mode of Marxist superstructure, as an ideology in service to the needs of capital.

But there is a crucial sense in which Hofstadter was not an orthodox Marxist, not an alienated intellectual, not a debunker of exploitative myths. Hofstadter was far too suspicious of mass politics to believe that the Left could create a beneficent political order. He accepted the Marxist critique of capitalism but showed little interest in the Marxist counterproposal. He knew of the Soviet Union's deplorable behavior in Spain, of Stalin's gulags and purges, and he had first-hand experience of the stifling conformity and rigidity of thought expected by the American Communist Party. His books focus on the deep-rooted flaws of the Left, its inability to transcend entrepreneurial culture and its tendency to fall into forms of political illiberalism. Hofstadter detested capitalism and its supporting ideology, but there is no reason to think he expected

²³ Singal, Daniel Joseph. "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography." American Historical Review, vol. 89, no. 4, 1984, pp. 980, 983.

²⁴ "To escape the dualisms of Progressive historiography, Hofstadter wanted to show how often the champions of the people collaborated in the entrepreneurial culture they claimed to transcend. For Hofstadter, who admired authentic dissent on the rare occasions he found it, the American political tradition was not pluralistic but hegemonic." Lears, T.J Jackson. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities." American Historical Review, v. 90, number 3, 1985, p. 576.

anything better to come from its overthrow. “I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it,” he wrote to his father in law. “But I also hate the simpering, dogmatic religious minded Janissaries that make up the Communist Party... We are not the beneficiaries of capitalism, but we will not be the beneficiaries of the socialism of the twentieth century—if any—any more than Zinoviev, Rykov and Bucharin were. We are the people with no place to go.”²⁵

No place to go: these poignant words express Hofstadter’s detachment not just from the Left but from faith in the possibility that a political movement could improve human life. Caught between the Scylla of predatory capitalism and the Charybdis of authoritarian socialism, Hofstadter was truly a man on the outside.²⁶ Hofstadter was a distinctly post-Nazi historian,²⁷ so deeply affected by the experience of the Holocaust and Stalinism that he saw shadows of totalitarian thought throughout American history. This did not mean that the similarities he discovered were mere imaginative projection. American reform *did* sometimes combine the same elements as Nazism, an insistence that the state was responsible for the welfare of the working class along with an exclusionary, national-racial conception of who did and did not belong. The Left was prone its own sort of authoritarianism, a belief that the working class was too thoroughly indoctrinated to see its own self-interest, and thus needed to be coerced away from its allegiance to capitalism. The post-Nazi historian has no faith. If he has a hope, it is for a

²⁵ Quoted in Baker, Susan Stoudt. Radical Beginnings, p. 151.

²⁶ In his 1967 introduction to The American Political Tradition, Hofstadter says he “had been looking at certain characters in American political history not only somewhat from the political left but also from outside the tradition itself, and that from this external angle of vision, the differences that seemed very sharp and decisive to those who dwelt altogether within it had begun to lose their distinctness...” p. xxiii. His correspondence shows this same sense of distance. He wrote to his father in law: “Personally, I got no faith. I don’t believe in faith, not in anything. If I did I would be a Catholic. I used to sneer when I read that Communism was a substitute religion, but I don’t anymore. It is.” Quoted in Baker, Susan Stoudt. Radical Beginnings, p. 150.

²⁷ My thanks to Andrew Isenberg for describing him this way. When Isenberg read The Age of Reform in graduate school, he heard echoes of Nazism in the way Hofstadter described the Populists. I believe Hofstadter saw the Populists as very different from the Nazis (I argue this in ch. 3) but it can hardly be doubted that Nazism had attuned Hofstadter to the racial-national, exclusionary and paranoid dimensions of political ideology, and that he found these features in Populism.

society that is indifferent to ideology and thus immune from its murderous effects. One sees this, perhaps, in Hofstadter's treatment of the New Deal as a time of respite between the ideological enthusiasms of the Progressives and the equally strident activism of the post-war Modern Liberal.

One sees it also in his sensitive treatment of the benefits that come from the American consensus. Consensus underwrote a culture of crass and unreflective acquisition, but it was also an effective prophylactic to the enthusiasms of political idealists. America had none of the sharp class antagonisms of Europe because consensus had worked so strongly against class consciousness. If labor exploitation was one its effects, so was a tradition of comity between political rivals. "Comity exists in a society," Hofstadter wrote, "to the degree that those enlisted in its contending interests have a basic, minimal regard for one another... The basic humanity of the opposition is not forgotten, civility is not abandoned, the sense that a community life must be carried on after the acerbic issues of the moment have been fought over and won is seldom very far out of mind."²⁸ Where ideological passions run strong, as they did among the Bolsheviks, or in Spain before its Civil War, or in Germany during the Weimar period, comity dies. Where the pursuit of gain takes the place of ideals, as it usually does in the United States, there one finds a form of civility, a freedom from the plague of political fervor.²⁹ To say, as Singal does, that Hofstadter "condemns consensus in the most acid terms" is to miss the ambivalence and complexity with which he treats this concept.

Hofstadter's appreciation of the value of consensus predictably led some critics to place him on the Right. Where his Left-leaning readers saw only condemnation of consensus, these other

²⁸ Progressive Historians, p. 454.

²⁹ "So far as the masses are concerned, what we call consensus is little more than apathy." Progressive Historians, p. 453. Hofstadter seems to suggest that this apathy is not wholly lamentable. If it gives business too much influence on government, it also insulates politics from mass enthusiasms and creates a framework for different social segments to coexist in peace.

critics saw only praise. When Hofstadter said that “Americans delude themselves when they try to underline the acerbity of their class conflicts,” that Alexis de Tocqueville was correct when he said that America was uniquely free from “polarized class conflict and correspondingly deep ideological differences,”³⁰ it seemed like an endorsement of American exceptionalism, and a defense of the capitalist culture that had created this lasting peace. In 1962, John Higham grouped Hofstadter with Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin in a consensus school: “Instead of the two-sided nation enshrined in Progressive history, a nation eternally divided between a party of the past and a party of the future, between noble ideals and ignoble interests... recent interpretations show us a homogenous culture. It is not hard to understand why this is so. Unlike the Progressive historian, his conservative successor does not feel much at odds with powerful institutions or dominant social groups. He is not even half alienated. Carried along in the general postwar reconciliation between America and its intellectuals... he usually reads the national record for evidence of a unifying spirit.”³¹ To Higham, Hofstadter’s rejection of class conflict as an analytic category was an indirect endorsement of conservatism.

There was no legitimate inference from his anti-Progressivism to his conservatism, but it is not hard to see how this entailment seemed plausible. The Progressive historians were the Leftists of their day, not unlike Howard Zinn in ours, willing to frame American history as an eternal conflict between rich and poor if that framing gave inspiration or precedent to their own struggle against predatory capitalism. To say that the Progressives had made it all up, that the so-called Left had always been entrepreneurial, meant that to be an American is to be part of the capitalist consensus. One can write history that strives not to editorialize, but people will always read it in search of values. And if, as Hofstadter seemed to suggest, America is monolithic

³⁰ *Progressive Historians*, p. 447, 440.

³¹ Higham, John. “Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic.” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 1962.

in its support for the capitalist consensus, then what values did his story teach? That one must choose between conformity and impotent marginalization? One can see why Higham saw consensus as an idea with conservative implications.

Higham was not the only critic to see Hofstadter this way. Hofstadter's portrayal of the reform movements in The Age of Reform was unflattering, and this antagonized many intellectuals on the Left. The Progressives, said Hofstadter, were middle class men who were mainly attuned to their declining social status. The Populists were even worse, trapped in nostalgia for an imagined past, nativist and Anti-Semitic, and prone to believe that unlikely conspiracies (including the inevitable Jewish bankers cabal) were the source of their problems. To Norman Pollack, the implication was clear. Hofstadter equated consensus to rationality itself, and thus saw any opponents of consensus as irrational. If the reform movements were deluded, there was no foundation to their grievances, and thus no legitimacy to their critique of industrial capitalism. "If Hofstadter is correct," wrote Pollack, "it follows that conditions giving rise to class feeling were themselves nonexistent. The result is a blanket endorsement of industrial capitalism and a consequent denial that conditions of oppression and concrete economic grievances ever existed...The consensus framework imposes a static model of society because it requires a standard or reference point by which to judge what is or is not irrational. Thus, all behavior not conforming to the model is categorized as irrational, with the result that the analysis is biased in favor of the *status quo* and places all protest movements by definition at a disadvantage."³²

These criticisms rested on a misunderstanding of the consensus idea. Hofstadter did not equate consensus to rationality, nor did he deny the existence of conflict in the American past.

³² Pollack, Norman. "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of the Age of Reform." Journal of Southern History, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1960), p. 486, 495.

He said consensus “has the status of an essentially negative proposition. It demarcates some of the limits of conflict in American history... It has somewhat the same relation to historical writing as an appropriate frame has to a painting. It sets the boundaries of the scene.” Far from being a celebration of America’s exceptional immunity to ideological strife, its origin “owes as much to Marx as to Tocqueville.” Hofstadter found “it hard to believe that any realistic Marxist historian could fail to be struck by the pervasively liberal-bourgeois character of American society in the past.”³³ What Pollack failed to grasp was that the idea of consensus did not deny the legitimacy of reform, but rather explained why reform movements had been so impotent. Consensus did not just constrain the range of possible conflict. It imposed limits on America’s political imagination, narrowing the task of reform to the restoration of “fair” economic competition. The consensus thesis did not merely deny the reality of a reform tradition opposed to capitalism. It asserted that for most of America’s history such opposition was inconceivable for all but a marginalized few. In the Age of Reform, Hofstadter returned to this aspect of the consensus thesis, again asserting the centrist, bourgeoisie character of America’s reform movements. America’s “tradition of political protest,” he wrote, “had been a response to the needs of entrepreneurial classes...The goal of such classes had generally been to clear the way for new enterprises and new men, break up privileged businesses, big businesses and monopolies, and give the small man better access to credit. The ideas of this Progressive tradition, as one might expect, were founded not merely on the acceptance but even upon the glorification of the competitive order.”³⁴ What Pollack failed to see was that Hofstadter did not call consensus rational as such. His point was that consensus *seemed* uniquely rational, *given*

³³ Progressive Historians, p. 453, 451.

³⁴ The Age of Reform, p. 303.

the assumptions of the typical American mind. Consensus was rational in relation to a set of premises, but there is no reason to believe that Hofstadter endorsed those premises.

Critics who try to discern whether the consensus idea has Leftist or Rightist political implications are missing the point. To write history with a measure of detachment, for Hofstadter, is to transcend these simplistic categories. His work reveals what Truillot calls the “invisible roots” of power, but it does not follow that the purpose behind this revelation is to challenge or change the structure of this power. If that were his purpose, he would indeed be a historian of the Left. But that in turn would presume that he had some faith in the capacity of a politically empowered working class to create a better political order, and he makes it quite clear that he has no such faith. He is the man with “nowhere to go.”

The introductions to his first three books all express his sense of the inadequacy of Left and Right as analytic categories. In The American Political Tradition, the consensus thesis is a flat denial of the Progressive belief that there is a party of the “people” set against a party of the “interests.” In Social Darwinism in American Thought, he notes the modernist and secular dimensions of the Spencerian synthesis and wonders whether “in the history of thought there was ever a conservatism so utterly progressive as this.” Darwinism was not the only idea that did not fit within a Left-Right dichotomy. “In America,” he wrote, “the roles of the liberal and the conservative have so often been intermingled, and in some ways reversed, that clear traditions have never taken form.”³⁵ He returns to this theme in the introduction to The Age of Reform. The reform movements “very strongly foreshadow some aspects of the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time. Somewhere along the way a large part of the populist-progressive tradition turned sour, become illiberal and ill-tempered... This process of deconversion from reform to reaction did not require the introduction of anything wholly new into the political

³⁵ Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. 9.

sensibilities of the American public, but only a development of certain tendencies that had existed all along, particularly in the Middle West and in the South... Isolationism and the extreme nationalism that usually goes with it, hatred of Europe and Europeans, racial, religious, and nativist phobias, resentment of big business, trade unions, intellectuals, the Eastern Seaboard and its culture—all these have been found not only in opposition to reform but at times oddly combined with it.”³⁶

These are not the thoughts of a historian who has set himself against the hegemonic ideology of a ruling elite. The political purpose of Hofstadter’s work is to effect the transcendence of the very idea that political history is defined by an opposition between ruler and ruled, between exploiters and exploited. He models this transcendence in the way he writes history, not just in his refusal to see Left and Right or reform and reaction as discrete categories, but in the way he treats political myth. He looks at myth as if he were spinning a jewel in his fingers to see each of its facets. He sees the harm that myths cause, their use as tools of domination, as inseparable from their function as mechanisms of social cohesion, providing political unity, peace, and a sense of purpose. To see myth with this balanced sense of appreciation is to see it with a measure of detachment.

Hofstadter’s ideal of detachment has been poorly understood, and this in turn has led to misunderstandings about his relation to Progressive historiography. The Progressives took the dualistic conflict model to the point of caricature, treating the whole of American political history as the product of class struggle. There is a remarkable degree of unanimity among critics that Hofstadter went through an early Progressive phase, in which his main purpose was to attack capitalism’s ideological supports. This is a mistake. Hofstadter never wrote history in the

³⁶ Age of Reform, p. 22.

Progressive mode. Read his first three books closely, and one sees the opposite, a thinker determined to show the inadequacies of the Progressive model.

In Radical Beginnings, a book length study of Hofstadter's early life and work, Susan Stoudt Baker argued that Hofstadter never outgrew his early allegiance to Marx and that his books, particularly the first two, were structured by the Marxist (and Progressive) categories of class conflict. In Social Darwinism, she says that Hofstadter "traced the rise and fall of a major thought system buttressing American capitalism. He attributed its decline to contradictions within the system itself and in its application to the economy. It did not bring order or equity to the human work situation. People—both intellectuals and middle-class consumers of this ideology—became conscious of the contradictions and rebelled against its tenets and implications."³⁷ One is struck by the conventionality of her interpretation, its assumption that Hofstadter saw social Darwinism merely as an ideological tool of the rich, and explained its "fall" as a result of people coming to see that it would not bring "order or equity to the human work situation." On her reading, Hofstadter was essentially a neo-Progressive engaged in intellectual class war, doing history to "unmask" the ideological devices that capital used to legitimate its exploitation of the worker.

But if that were the main thrust of Hofstadter's story, why would he talk about the adoption of Social Darwinism by the reform movements, its use as a bludgeon against immigrants and city dwellers, its warm reception by the eugenicists, or its fusion with militant nationalism in Theodore Roosevelt's imperial dreams? Of course he described Darwinism as congenial to plutocrats, but Hofstadter's principal interest is not in the Marxist story of ideology as a device for class domination. He saw an America united in its adherence to the ethos of entrepreneurial competition, and thus receptive to the sanctification of ruthless struggle that Darwinism seemed

³⁷ Baker, Susan Stoudt. Radical Beginnings, p. 170.

to provide. There was no Left or Right, just different groups who each took up the Darwinist vision to justify the form of predacity that met their emotional and material needs. Hofstadter had clearly moved beyond the narrative frame of the Progressive historians, rejecting the paradigm of class struggle but more importantly the assumption that the meaning of a social idea is coterminous with its economic role. He was writing cultural history, probing the connection between ideology and the symbolic dimensions of mental life. How did Darwinism fit within the cultural preconceptions of various social groups? How did it serve their emotional as well as material needs? What was its role in the struggle over issues that were not directly connected to power and resources, such as who was a “real” American or what role America was destined to play on the world stage? These are the sorts of cultural questions that exercise Hofstadter’s imagination even here in his first book, and that is why it is a mistake to see him as engaged in a neo-Progressive exercise.

David S. Brown’s more recent biography of Hofstadter commits the same error. Brown says that Hofstadter evolved from an early class warrior into a moderate, centrist liberal.³⁸ In his young radical phase (Social Darwinism and The American Political Tradition), Hofstadter “repeated rather than revised the main currents of Progressive thought,”³⁹ while “in the end, the liberal tag fits Hofstadter best. His respect for intellectual freedom, cultural latitude, and political pluralism found a home in the Democratic party of the 1950’s, and I suspect that is where he would be today (uncomfortably).”⁴⁰

³⁸ “Unencumbered by deep roots in the native soil of his immigrant father’s adopted country, Hofstadter enlisted the past to reveal the failings of a time-worn political tradition and by inference highlight the promise of what he believed to be a more humane, cosmopolitan and pluralistic liberalism.” Brown, David S. Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. xiv.

³⁹ Brown, David S. Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Brown, David S. Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography, p. 88.

Brown said "Social Darwinism adopted a neo-Progressive perspective that emphasized, as Eric Foner has noted, economic self-interest as the basis for action. Hofstadter may have left the Communist Party, but his dissertation clearly showed that he had not surrendered intellectually to the capitalist system. Still disenchanted with Roosevelt, still suspicious of the New Deal, and still not reconciled to the undemocratic underpinnings of the industrial state, he laid waste to the empty idols and false gods that had propped up the temple of free enterprise."⁴¹

But "laying waste to the idols of free enterprise" is not what Hofstadter was actually doing in his first two books. The unifying thread in both texts is a self-conscious, almost obsessive anti-Progressivism, a determination to show the insufficiency of economic interest as a determinant of ideological affiliation or change. What we see in these texts is a blooming *cultural* historian, a writer who believed that the interpretive process of creating and contesting meanings (the *idea* of Social Darwinism, the *idea* of consensus) had a causative role in history that the Progressive historians had mostly ignored.

In 1968, when he wrote The Progressive Historians, Hofstadter explained how the consensus idea developed in opposition to Beard: "One of the basic tenets of Progressive writers, the notion that political and constitutional ideas were merely opportunistic improvisations masking fundamental economic interests was shown to be a rather superficial and almost philistine version of the actual subtle relation among ideas, interests and attitudes."⁴² I believe that this was not a revelation which came to him late in life. Hofstadter had no need to look back on his early work and wish that he had been less Progressive. Read his first three books closely, and one sees how his new, cultural methodology, along with the sense of equipoise and detachment that he believed prerequisite to its proper application, were inextricable from his repudiation of

⁴¹ Brown, David S., Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography, p. 29.

⁴² The Progressive Historians, p. 441.

Progressive historiography, and particularly from his efforts to surpass the limitations he saw in Beard.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL DARWINISM IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

This chapter argues that Hofstadter's first book, Social Darwinism in American Thought, should be read as a critical response to Beard. Many critics have observed that this text has debts to Beard, but none have worked out the nature of that debt. This chapter aims to fill that lacuna. In The Progressive Historians, Hofstadter examined Beard's work at length. One can use this text to illuminate Social Darwinism if two assumptions are accepted: first, that what Hofstadter had to say about Beard in 1968 is a fair approximation of what he thought about him when he wrote Social Darwinism in 1942, and second, that the methodological flaws Hofstadter found in Beard's work were the same ones that he was determined not to repeat in his own story of Darwinism in America.

Social Darwinism in American Thought was about American ideologues who used evolutionary biology to justify an array of prescriptive social ideas in the period between 1870 and 1914. Its structure was loosely narrative. In the 1870's Darwinism arrived in America in the form of Herbert Spencer's synthesis, which was then popularized by men like William Graham Sumner. Hofstadter calls this early phase Darwinian individualism. Its premise was that in nature, selective pressures like predation or starvation weed out the unfit, and thus strengthen the species by leaving only well-adapted organisms to pass on their traits. Human society, the individualists believed, must mirror this beneficent natural pattern. To help the weak is to preserve them and thus harm the species. Nature's lesson—and here is the confluence between Darwinism and conservatism—is that social progress cannot occur if the state ameliorates the inequities and sufferings that arise from capitalism.

The rich were naturally receptive to this view, and in the first few decades after the Civil War, so was the middle class. But in the 1890's "the public mind"⁴³ shifted away from this tooth and claw vision of social progress toward a new vision that Hofstadter called Darwinian Collectivism.⁴⁴ In the Progressive era, the public mind learned to accept a reforming role for the state, and Darwinism was a part of this transformation in political thinking. But, as one might expect from Hofstadter, we get no triumphal story of the victory of the Left. The main forms of Darwinian Collectivism were racial nationalism and eugenics. Hofstadter's picture is that the early, individualistic forms of predacity glorified by Spencer evolved into more collectivist forms of predacity defined by nationality and race. The Left embraced Darwinism because it gave legitimacy to Progressive efforts to police minorities, immigrants and slums. There was no use of Darwinism to oppose capitalism. The racial imperialism of the 1890's buttressed capitalism by giving all social classes a shared, manly endeavor in the form of war. It did not challenge the American economic system so much as push its burdens from the American poor onto the poor of other nations.⁴⁵ For Hofstadter, then, the predatory implications of Darwinism were welcome to all parts of the American political spectrum because nearly everyone embraced the competitive, individualistic, capitalist ethos that Darwinism seemed to sanctify. This was no Progressive story of good vs. evil, of the people vs. the interests. It was, rather, a clear

⁴³ When Hofstadter helps himself to this reified entity, the "public mind" (see, for example, p. 203) he does not deny the differences between various social subgroups, but rather assumes, as he will in The American Political Tradition, that there were agreements that framed the boundaries of dispute. Darwinian individualism was a part of the post-Civil War consensus until that consensus changed in the 1890's, and then again just before WWI.

⁴⁴ "In time, the middle class shrank from the principle it had glorified, turned in flight from the hideous image of rampant, competitive brutality, and repudiated the once heroic entrepreneur as the despoiler of the nation's wealth." Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. 202.

⁴⁵ Charles Bergquist is not entirely fair when he says that U.S. historiography "systematically ignores the role of labor during periods of expansionism." The two are not explicitly connected here in Social Darwinism, but they certainly are in Hofstadter's article "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines." See Bergquist, Charles. Labor and the Course of American Democracy. London: Verso Books, 1996, p. 5.

foreshadowing of the consensus thesis, a claim that Darwinism's ubiquitous acceptance reflected the dominant place of bourgeois liberalism in American political ideology.

When Social Darwinism finally passed out of the American ideology, it was not because of any economic change or fresh assertion of class interest, but rather because Darwinism had become associated with German militarism: "Then, ironically, the 'Anglo-Saxon' peoples were swept by a revulsion from international violence. They now turned about and with one voice accused the enemy of being the sole advocate of racial aggression and militarism... Forever after, Darwinian militarism sounded too much like dangerous German talk."⁴⁶ Here again we see Hofstadter distance himself from the Progressive historians. The end of Darwinism came from its association with a negative reference group, the brutal Germans, not because the idea suddenly ceased to be a useful economic instrument.⁴⁷

It is evident even from this bald summary that Hofstadter's take on how Darwinism fit into the larger trajectory of the reform movements, as well as the way he diagnosed the causes of ideological change, showed a deliberate distance from the themes and methods of Progressive historiography. And yet the critical consensus is that this book was essentially Beardian. Daniel Singal said Social Darwinism "afforded Hofstadter the chance to reconnoiter his enemy, the conservative ideology of individualism and laissez-faire... Hofstadter's own allegiance clearly lay with the 'New Collectivism' of John Dewey and Thorsten Veblen and its vision of a cohesive society and active state guided by rational thought."⁴⁸ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick offered a

⁴⁶ Social Darwinism, p. 203.

⁴⁷ Robert K. Merton, Hofstadter's colleague at Columbia, developed the concept of negative reference group. Lee Benson, who studied with both Hofstadter and Merton, defined a negative reference group as "a general concept designed to earmark that pattern of hostile relations between groups or collectivities in which the actions, attitudes and values of one are dependent on those of the other to which it stands in opposition." The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 27. Benson made heavy use of this concept, arguing for the insufficiency of class interest to explain voting behavior in New York in the Jacksonian period. Hofstadter makes the same point here: America shed Darwinism because it did not want to be like the Germans.

⁴⁸ Singal, Daniel. "Beyond Consensus," p. 982.

similar view: “Hofstadter’s Social Darwinism, for all its dexterity, was still an exercise in the Progressive mode...constrained by the exigencies of an adversarial framework which required that the forces of conservatism and orthodoxy be ranged in order of battle against those of enlightenment and innovation.”⁴⁹ David S. Brown presented a similar picture: “More than any other book, Social Darwinism adopted a neo-Progressive perspective that emphasized economic self-interest as the basis for action...Hofstadter was able to merge both his scholarship and his politics into a powerful critique of the great titans.”⁵⁰ Eric Foner agreed: “When Hofstadter tries to explain the rise and fall of Social Darwinism, he falls back on the base-superstructure shared by Marxists and Beardians in the 1930’s... Social Darwinism served the needs of those that controlled the raw, aggressive, industrial society of the Gilded Age. Spencer, Sumner and the other social Darwinists were telling businessmen and political leaders what they wanted to hear...Subsequently, the middle class’ growing disenchantment with unbridled competition led it to repudiate Social Darwinism and adopt a more reform minded social outlook in the Progressive era.”⁵¹

Susan Stoudt Baker, author of the only book length study of Hofstadter’s work other than Brown’s, saw this text as an expression of Hofstadter’s allegiance to Marxism. Baker knew that Hofstadter did not regard ideology purely as an expression of economic interest, and that he did not attribute all ideological change to shifts in the economic base. Her thoughtful analysis of Hofstadter’s early student papers showed this awareness.⁵² And yet her view was that

⁴⁹ Elkins, Stanley and McKittrick, Eric. “Richard Hofstadter: A Progress.” The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, pp. 304-306.

⁵⁰ Brown, David S. Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography, p. 29.

⁵¹ Foner, Eric. Introduction to 1983 edition of Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. xvi.

⁵² See, for example, her gloss on Hofstadter’s 1940 paper, “Some Psychological Aspects of the Slavery Issue.” There Hofstadter wrote: “The stubborn persistence of caste psychology among Southern whites should be sufficient proof that the character of the old slave relationship is not exhaustively explained by reference to its economic aspects. We may well believe that the origins of race prejudice lay in the subordinate economic position of the Southern Negro, but it is only too obvious that when such a

economics was primary for Hofstadter, that ideology had economic roots even if it had cultural branches. For Baker, changes in the shape of American Darwinism followed the logic of dialectical materialism. In Social Darwinism, Baker wrote, “Hofstadter traced the rise and fall of a major thought system buttressing American Capitalism. He attributed its decline to contradictions within the system itself and in its application to the economy. It did not bring order or equity to the human work situation. People—both intellectuals and middle class consumers of this ideology—became conscious of the contradictions and rebelled against its tenets and implications. In dialectical fashion... a new synthesis had been attained by a combination of old free enterprise and new reform and regulatory precepts... For a system with such failures, was Hofstadter’s implication, the only answer was its antithesis: regulation as a way to stabilize economic forces, protections for the unlucky or unskilled, provision of an organ of expression to the ‘unfit’.”⁵³ One can see in this passage that Baker, like most critics, believed that Hofstadter used history as a vehicle for political advocacy, that Social Darwinism was a critique of *laissez-faire* and a plea for state sponsored aid to the ‘unfit’. Like most critics, she also saw the early Hofstadter as Marxist in his theory of ideological change. The reform movements were expressions of working class interests, just as Darwinian individualism had been an expression of the interests of the owner class.

These critics were correct that Beard had a profound influence on Hofstadter. Beard’s skeptical method of unmasking, where latent purpose is separated from professed motives, was fundamental to how Hofstadter understood ideological affiliation. They were also correct that Hofstadter saw economic interest as a crucial determinant of such affiliations. Yet, one wishes that these critics had been as eager to explore Hofstadter’s departures from Progressive

prejudice is given an initial push by economic events, it generates enough power to persist on its own.” Quoted in Baker, Susan Stoudt. Radical Beginnings, p. 157.

⁵³ Baker, Susan Stoudt, Radical Beginnings, p. 169-70.

historiography as they were to see his debts. In this book, economics was *not* solely or even chiefly determinative of ideology; cultural factors, most importantly the harmony of an idea with existing beliefs, is at least as important in explaining why an idea finds acceptance. The Darwinian individualists were *not* portrayed as tools of the wealthy, but as principled men dedicated to a vision of social progress. Darwinian individualism was *not* seen as a conservative tool to frustrate reform, but as a competing version of modernity, aiming to define the role of the state in a new, industrial era, not to hold onto its agrarian past. Darwinian collectivism was *not* seen as an expression of working class interest, but as a way to harmonize those interests with those of the owner class. Collectivism was *not* a repudiation of capitalism or a dawning sense of the need to provide for the unfit; it was a rationalization for economic nationalism, a capitalist order in which the unfit have been labelled as foreign or non-white.

Lastly, there was no sense of political advocacy in this book. Whatever contempt Hofstadter felt towards the Rightist Carnegies and Vanderbilts who used Darwinism to dismiss the misery of the working class, it was matched by his contempt for the so-called Leftist alternative, the eugenicists and imperialists. As many critics have pointed out, his most sympathetic portraits are of the dissenting intellectuals like Lester Ward or the Pragmatists. But Hofstadter saw these dissenters as isolated and largely ignored. They were irritants, to use his metaphor from the American Political Tradition, which the American oyster enclosed in nacre. It seems, then, that far from a book of Leftist advocacy, what one finds here is a deep cynicism towards mass politics of any variety. The dilemma is the same one we find in the American Political Tradition: join the consensus and embrace predacity of one stripe or another, or resign yourself to political impotence. If there is a tacit endorsement here, it is not for the traditional Left or Right, but for those (like Hofstadter himself) who stand outside the tradition altogether.

The critics, then, have it exactly backwards. This book is defined not by its debts to Beard, but by its repudiations. It is deliberately and consistently anti-Progressive. Where Beard stressed economics, Hofstadter focused on culture. Where Beard saw ideological change as defined by a clear-cut conflict between Right and Left, Hofstadter rejected these categories as blunt and misleading. Where Beard saw the reform movements as anti-capitalist, Hofstadter saw them as evolutions of capitalism. Where Beard enlisted history as a tool of reform, Hofstadter had no political affiliation. This is not a denial of Beard's influence. It is a suggestion that Marx and Beard were for Hofstadter a sort of negative reference group, much as the Germans were to Americans during WWI. Their influence was profound, but mainly negative.

To see Social Darwinism this way is to regard it as a work of intellectual patricide. The story of Darwinism in America fits into the arc of Hofstadter's work not as a vestige of his allegiance to communism (as Susan Stoudt Baker suggests) but rather as a sign of his loss of faith in Marx and Beard, in communism and social progress, in the very hope that one can look to politics for something other than organized predacity.

In the introduction to Social Darwinism, Hofstadter acknowledged the 'conservative' use to which Darwinism was put, but observed that it did not fit comfortably within the categories of Left or Right, that there was a radicalism to this idea that gets overlooked if it is seen merely as a device to protect the interests of the wealthy. "In America the roles of liberal and conservative have been so often intermingled, and in some ways reversed, that clear traditions have never taken form... In the American political tradition the side of the 'right'—that is, the side devoted to property and less given to popular enthusiasms and democratic professions—has been identified throughout the greater part of our history with men who, while political conservatives, were in economic and social terms headlong innovators and daring promoters...If we look through the history of our practical politics for men who spoke favorably of restoring or

conserving old values, we will find them—not exclusively, to be sure, but most characteristically—among those who leaned moderately to the ‘left’.”⁵⁴ In the former category one finds Hamilton, Nicholas Biddle and tycoons like Carnegie and Rockefeller, in the latter, Jefferson, Jackson, and the Populists.

Darwinian individualism belonged to the first group, radical in some ways, conservative in others. The individualists opposed state amelioration of capitalism, but not out of nostalgia. They had no reverence for custom, continuity, or tradition, nor did they have the quasi-religious respect for state power that one finds in a ‘classical’ conservative like Edmund Burke. They were not trying to hold on to *laissez-faire* in the face of encroaching socialism, so much as to create the ‘pure’ *laissez-faire* that they felt had never quite come to be. They looked forward to the withering of state power, not because the state was an ally of the poor, but because interested parties regularly used state power to effect unfair economic distortions; an absentee state, by contrast, would create a fair and open playing field in which all competitors had an equal chance of success.

Obviously, the idea that Carnegie and his workers could compete on an even field was naïve. But it was nonetheless sincere. The individualists were not just opportunistic in their acceptance of Darwinism. They genuinely believed that the best way to help the greatest number of people was for the state to do nothing at all. Where does one categorize this belief? Is it conservative or is it a radical, modern form of egalitarianism? What Hofstadter asks us to see is that our usual Left vs. Right, progressive vs. conservative categorization of political beliefs is not particularly useful here. The close link between innovation and the Left was not forged until the New Deal, and the link is now so strong that it can lead to anachronism. To understand Darwinian individualism in its historical moment is to put aside this prejudice. The Darwinian individualists

⁵⁴ Social Darwinism, p. 9.

were an innovative Right (future oriented, with no concern for the plight of the poor), while many of their opponents, like the Populists, were a conservative Left (nostalgic and backward looking, *because* they saw an earlier era as better for the poor).

The clear parallel here is to Beard's view of the Framers of the Constitution as conservatives, motivated by cupidity to fight a counter-revolution against the levelling impulses released by the Revolution. Just as the Darwinian individualists are misunderstood if they are seen merely as rich people who used an ideological tool to hold onto their property, the Framers are misrepresented, if one sees the Constitution they created as a device to protect their interests from the grasping hands of dirt farmers. Beard's great virtue, Hofstadter said, was to be the first historical sociologist of ideas, to insist that one cannot understand ideas without reference to the interests of social groups. His great vice was that he saw these interests as a simple, dualistic opposition defined by economic class.

For Hofstadter, this revealed Beard's tendency to allow his moralistic side to supersede his scientific detachment.⁵⁵ Beard had a laudable purpose. He wanted to challenge the reigning formalism of his day, the idea that the *laissez-faire* principles incorporated in the Constitution somehow expressed a necessary or eternal political order. Beard showed that these principles came from men, not nature, and they served factional interests, not a code of timeless political truths. But in achieving this purpose Beard sacrificed his more scientific side, the side which *should* have told him that the motives of the Framers were more complex than just a desire to hold onto their money.

⁵⁵ Beard was "bedeviled by the opposition between his belief in the discipline of history as science and his passionate desire to put it to work as a moral force." Progressive Historians, p. 178. "From an early date, Beard had a divided mind about the role of the historian. On the one hand he believed that history ought to be an instrument of social criticism and social progress; on the other, that the historian or political scientist should be governed by the ideal of scientific detachment and stay clear of moral judgments." Progressive Historians, p. 228.

Hofstadter discussed some of the complexities that Beard overlooked. There was in fact a broad consensus on the need of government to protect property. On that the “radicals” (the anti-Federalists) and the “conservatives” agreed. “The central issue, around which the others circled like dim and distant satellites, was whether the American union should become a national state.”⁵⁶ To this question each state, and each faction within each state, formed an answer which reflected their particular interests. The states bordering the Great Lakes wanted the union for protection against the threat of British expansion from Canada. Connecticut and New Jersey depended on the port of New York and wanted union to ensure their continued access. Georgia embraced union because she feared war with the Indians. Delaware was far too small to go it alone. All these states quickly ratified with no significant opposition from the agricultural class.

Another motive to union that Beard ignored was the Revolutionary experience itself. For many who had served in the Continental army, or suffered British depredations on the coasts or frontier, union seemed necessary for self-protection.⁵⁷ For these men, the Revolution had created a *de facto* union which the Constitution promised to make *de jure*.

Opposition to union was similarly more complex than Beard had made it out to be. To be sure, the anti-Federalists feared that the rich would use the union to further selfish interests, but their more immediate fear was that the new union would supply a new, distant, tyrannical central government to replace the one they had so recently fought against. And for many, the whole Constitutional issue became a proxy for inveterate local antagonisms. For these men, support or opposition to union depended mainly on how their customary enemies felt about it.

⁵⁶ Progressive Historians, p. 230.

⁵⁷ Progressive Historians, pp. 233-6.

For Hofstadter, Beard's great mistake was to put his moralism before his scientific obligation to represent a historical problem in its full complexity. Hofstadter quotes a "splendid passage" from Friedrich Engels which seems to sum up his own complaint against Beard: "History makes itself in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each again has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms that give rise to one resultant—the historical event."⁵⁸ Engels' critique of Marx's simple dualism of workers vs. owners parallels Hofstadter's critique of Beard's contest between merchants and farmers. For Hofstadter, historical causation is a kind of Brownian motion, where an infinite multiplicity of particles, each on its own vector, create a result (the historical event) as an aggregate effect of their collisions. This vision does not lend itself to narrative simplicity or readability or moral dichotomies. It is, rather, an interpretation of what it means to write history with a proper sense of detachment, attentive to complexity and *therefore* indifferent to the moral and political purposes to which history is so often put.

To what extent does one see this vision of a properly scientific history in Social Darwinism? There is, firstly, no Beardian tension between detachment and moral judgment, because there is no moral judgment. Contrary to what the critics say, there is little support for the idea that Hofstadter's "enemies" are the plutocrats or their apologists nor that his "heroes" are the Darwinian collectivists. The first section of Social Darwinism, on the thought of William Graham Sumner, is consistently neutral in tone, if not outright admiring. Sumner is shown as an iconoclast to many elements of conservative thought, even if he is a defender of *laissez-faire*. He had no veneration for traditional pieties, for the "survivals" of an old American cultural order.

⁵⁸ Progressive Historians, p. 230.

“Never,” says Hofstadter, “was there a conservatism so utterly progressive as this.”⁵⁹ Sumner was also heroically anti-clerical. Hofstadter describes a clash between Sumner and Noah Porter, president of Yale University, where Porter demanded that Sumner stop using the works of Herbert Spencer (who was thought to be an atheist) as class texts. Sumner refused, even when threatened with dismissal. Sumner emerges as a defender of academic freedom and protector of science against the forces of religious orthodoxy.⁶⁰ Hofstadter rejects the judgment of Upton Sinclair, who called Sumner “a prime minister in the empire of plutocratic education.” Rather, says Hofstadter, Sumner “was not a business hireling, nor did he feel himself to be the spokesman of the plutocracy, but rather of the middle classes,” as shown by his outspoken opposition to trade protectionism and tariffs, positions that earned him the hatred of business leaders.⁶¹ The causal origins of Sumner’s views were personal rather than mercenary. He had a deep respect for his father, “who provided for himself without making demands upon the state,” while Sumner’s greatest fear was “the crushing effect of taxation” on ordinary people like his parents.⁶² Hofstadter’s treatment is the opposite of moralistic. He saw Sumner’s views as sincere, consistent, courageously defended, and responsive to the lessons of his own life experience.

Lester Ward, a supposed hero of the book, got the rough treatment that we were supposed to find meted out to Sumner. Hofstadter derided Ward’s proposals for state intervention in the economy as “vague” and “naïve,” hinting that Ward’s hope for a “sociocracy” that would “distribute favors according to merit,” while “equalizing opportunity for all” was absurdly utopian.⁶³ On the issue of imperialism, again one found a curious reversal of expected roles.

⁵⁹ Social Darwinism, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Social Darwinism, p. 20.

⁶¹ Social Darwinism, p. 63.

⁶² Social Darwinism, p. 64.

⁶³ Social Darwinism, p. 84.

Sumner was an outspoken critic of imperialism, a position consistent with his belief that individual competition, not national rivalry, was nature's mechanism for selecting the fittest. Ward, Hofstadter noted, fell in with the proponents of race struggle, finding in their work a connection between his own collectivist agenda and the centripetal, unifying effects of patriotism and war.⁶⁴

More important than Hofstadter's avoidance of the Disney tendency to appoint heroes and villains is his use of a complex causal model to explain historical change. This is evident in his explanation of how Darwinian individualism came to find such wide acceptance. Of course he acknowledged that the rich found Darwinian individualism a useful tool for beating back the collectivist challenge. "Grangers, Greenbackers, Single Taxers, Knights of Labor, Trade Unionists, Populists, Socialists Utopian and Marxian—all presented challenges to the existing pattern of free enterprise, demanded reforms by state action, or insisted upon a thorough remodeling of the social order."⁶⁵ Faced with these assaults, the plutocrats were naturally receptive to Herbert Spencer, whose theories had an inherently conservative bent. Spencer believed in social determinism: things were the way they must be, and to want them different is to rebel against God's and nature's law. The "survival of the fittest" (Spencer's phrase, not Darwin's) meant that winners deserved to win and losers deserved to lose. It justified predatory capitalism, from labor exploitation to monopoly to the ruthless destruction of business rivals, because it suggested that the aggregate of effect of these small tragedies would be the betterment of society as a whole. It meant that state interference in the economy would be dysgenic, harmful to the human race. Better to let the strong survive and the weak perish, so that strength multiplied and weakness died out. As John D. Rockefeller's put it, "the growth of American business is

⁶⁴ Social Darwinism, p. 78.

⁶⁵ Social Darwinism, p. 46.

merely a survival of the fittest. The American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which brings cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and of God's law."

But Darwinism's allure was not confined to the rich. It appealed to people who viewed themselves as rational, scientific and modern, and in the 1870's, this appeal was felt by the universities, the press, and eventually, by the churches. Higher education was in the midst of a seismic curricular shift, from a traditionalism based on the study of Greek and Roman classics to a practical emphasis that would meet the nation's burgeoning need for technicians.⁶⁶ When Daniel Coit Gilman invited Spencer to inaugurate the opening of the Johns Hopkins University in 1876, it symbolized a new self-conception, a "symbolic note of defiance to obscurantism." Darwinism was thus a tool for universities that were redefining their purpose. Newspapers and magazines had their own institutional reasons for interest in Darwinism. Magazines like The Nation, Atlantic Monthly, and Popular Science Monthly featured regular, if non-committal, articles on the evolution controversy. The American reading public had a fascination for the modern and new, a desire to know what was in the forefront of intellectual and scientific change. Attention to Darwinism was part of how the press fed this hunger, and sold its newspapers.⁶⁷ Organized religion would never be completely converted to Darwinism, but churchmen tried to convince their congregations that there was nothing incompatible between Darwinism and faith. Henry Ward Beecher was one example of this trend, stressing that the "art of religion" could never be supplanted by the "science of theology." The one was a matter of sensitivity and feeling, the other a set of propositions that could and would be revised in light of

⁶⁶ Social Darwinism, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Social Darwinism, p. 23.

scientific advances. Thus, for thinkers like Beecher, Darwinism became a way to hold onto believers by making those believers feel that there was no dilemmatic choice to be made between faith and reason.

There was, then, a multiplicity of social groups, each with its own set of interests, who found Darwinism a useful tool for self-advancement. Similarly, there was an array of cultural factors, each of which contributed to Darwinism's popularity. William Graham Sumner's tremendous success as a popularizer of Darwin flowed from his ability to connect it to existing cultural dispositions. There was, firstly, the economics of *laissez-faire*, the only system anyone in the world had ever known. Sumner's fusion of *laissez-faire* to natural law made sense to people who literally could not conceive of anything else. Secondly, there was the Protestant ethic. The idea that financial success reflected natural superiority was no great leap from the view that it was evidence of divine grace.⁶⁸ Thirdly, there was the frontier myth, the ideal of rugged individualism, where the conflicts and privation of frontier life were thought to build the appropriate masculine character. The salutary effects of individual competition would have a familiar ring to those nurtured on Turner's celebration of the frontier.

Why did Hofstadter focus on this wide variety of social and institutional pressures towards Darwinism? Why look at its congeniality to existing cultural factors? The answer, perhaps, is that he was doing precisely what Beard failed to do in his analysis of the forces that created the Constitution. Beard had reduced the struggle over the Constitution to a simple dualism.⁶⁹ In place of that dualism, Hofstadter gave us multiplicity. Beard had reduced human motivation to

⁶⁸ Social Darwinism, p. 51.

⁶⁹ "In his account of the Constitution," Beard adopted "a dualistic picture of the political struggle... In regarding the struggle over the Constitution as a fight between broad, more or less homogenous coalitions rather than an exceedingly complex jumble of special interests, he fell into a trap from which a consistent use of A.F. Bentley or Madisonian pluralism might have saved him." Progressive Historians, p. 188.

economic interest. Hofstadter did not dispute the centrality of economics, but insisted that cultural factors have their own causal efficacy: "Beard seems to have thought of men as simply perceiving their interests and then, rather naturally, drifting into the use or acceptance of ideas that would further them. He does not seem to have recognized, at least not by 1913, that the way in which men perceive and define their interests is in good part a reflex of the ideas they have inherited and the experiences they have undergone... Economic interests as such are not always obvious or given; they have to be conceptualized and made the object of calculations or guesses. They have to be weighed against other kinds of interests, sentiments and aspirations. Ideas themselves constitute interests, in that they are repositories of past interests and that they present to us claims of their own that have to be satisfied. With ideas, with moral impulses, with cultural forces that could not closely be tied to economic origins, Beard throughout his career was often quite inept."⁷⁰

One can see in this passage why Hofstadter saw the Progressive historiography of the American Revolution as simplistic and why he thought a "neo-Whig" like Bernard Bailyn had found a more sensitive treatment of its political ideas,⁷¹ and also why Beard's take on the Civil War, which had at one time looked so brilliant to Hofstadter, would later seem dated and blunt. Beard read the Civil War as an economic struggle between capitalists and planters, in which ideological factors like the "agitations of the abolitionists" or the legal disputes over states' rights and the permissibility of secession were ephemera obscuring the "real" contest between competing economic systems.⁷² In the way he treated the Revolution, the Constitution and the Civil War, Beard had created a *false antinomy* between ideas and interests, between the "hard

⁷⁰ Progressive Historians, p. 245.

⁷¹ Progressive Historians, p. 443.

⁷² Progressive Historians, p. 303.

realities” that caused historical change, and what he saw as the ideological smokescreens used to justify or propagate those interests.

Ideas, says Hofstadter, *are* interests. They have a reality of their own, for which men will fight and die, because they are vessels in which human needs, fears and aspirations have been invested. Why does a man die to save a flag from falling to the ground, or to plant a cross in a distant land, or to protect slavery even though he knows he will never own a slave? Using economics to answer these questions is no more fruitful than using the language of particle physics to explain love. One may concede that on some level, economic facts (or collisions of particles) are what is “really” going on, but there is an inevitable descriptive inadequacy to this way of speaking because it is so distant from the way in which these events are actually experienced. It is this symbolic, irreducibly conceptual dimension to human life that Beard failed to grasp, and this constrained his ability to see the complex function of political ideas and the totality of their role in historical change.

In his later books, Hofstadter would explore different layers of this complex functionality—for example, by connecting political ideas to Freudian analysis in The Paranoid Style, or to status politics in The Age of Reform—but the germ of that developmental arc is present here in his first book. “There is certainly some interaction between social ideas and social institutions,” Hofstadter tells us in his conclusion. “Ideas have effects as well as causes... 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.”⁷³ These few, enigmatic sentences are all we find, if we look for Hofstadter to explain the method that guided him in Social Darwinism. But the key themes are there: Ideas have effects as well as causes. Ideas are accepted because they satisfy intellectual needs, not just because they serve rational, logical

⁷³ Social Darwinism, p. 204.

economic motives. Look to the existing cultural framework to understand why people believed something and what that idea meant to them. We have, in short, the initial formulation of the question that would occupy Hofstadter for the rest of his life: how can a historian grasp a social structure through the mirror of its ideas? How can one unpack the meaning of those ideas to reveal the complete world—economic, moral, political, emotional—of the society which produced them, and in turn use that world to illuminate the meaning of the ideas?

None of this implies a complete repudiation of Beard. Neither in this book nor in any of his books does Hofstadter treat ideas in isolation from economics in the manner of Bailyn. If Hofstadter were alive to see the work of his student Eric Foner, who at times seems to treat the whole of American history as the unfolding of the single idea of freedom, he would probably scorn it as an odd form of neo-Hegelianism, and remind him of the value of Beard's attention to "hard realities." If he could see Ken Burns' magnificent films about the Civil War, which at times seem to suggest that the war had little to do with economics and everything to do with living up to our noblest aspirations, he would probably wish that Burns had paid more attention to Beard. Hofstadter never falls into the intellectualist fallacy of thinking that ordinary people pay as much attention to ideologues as ideologues pay to each other. He says as much in his conclusion, reminding us that the story of Darwinism in America "is a clear example of the principle that changes in the structure of social ideas wait on general changes in economic and political life."⁷⁴ The same point is implicit in his treatment of Lester Ward or other intellectuals who were utterly ignored until economic changes had made the middle class receptive to their ideas.⁷⁵ And this, perhaps, is the germ of truth in the critical consensus that Hofstadter wrote this book under Beard's sway. Economic changes *do* have a fundamental role in causing ideological change.

⁷⁴ Social Darwinism, p. 204.

⁷⁵ Ward "suffered undeserved neglect for the very reason that he was so far in advance of the rest of his generation." Social Darwinism, p. 84.

What the critics miss is what Hofstadter explained in The Progressive Historians: economic changes are conceptualized before they affect policy or ideology, and because conceptualization occurs within a preexisting cultural framework, economic shifts lead to historical change only through the mediating (and often stultifying) effects of culture.

One can see this methodology in the later chapters of Social Darwinism. Hofstadter explained the fall of Darwinian individualism in a passage that Beard could have written: “It was not so much that the old arguments for individualism had been answered to general satisfaction. They had been swept away by a groundswell of popular feeling deeper than any of the subtleties of the social theorists... The frustrations of the middle class and the needs of the poor were accelerating that change... The middle-class citizen, as producer and consumer, was beginning to feel the growth of monopoly and to fear that he would be ground between large combinations of capital and labor. As the middle class worried about maintaining its status and its standard of living, the figure of the great capitalist entrepreneur, hitherto heroic, lost much of his glamour.”⁷⁶ But then the narrative takes a decidedly un-Beardian turn. It was not the working class who opposed Darwinian individualism, it was the middle class, and instead of the socialism one might expect if economics were the puppet master of ideas, the middle class fell back on the familiar ideology of *laissez-faire*, with the difference that now, because of threats from monopoly and organized labor, state intervention was seen as necessary to preserve a competitive order in which an individual could rise in proportion to his virtues. The Sherman Anti-Trust Act, for example, was mainly a middle-class effort to restrain “bigness” of any variety, an effort to preserve a dying economic order in which small entrepreneurism could flourish. Woodrow Wilson would ride this oddly regressive Progressivism to the White House. He conjured a nostalgic memory of an America of small businessmen, and promised to use state

⁷⁶ Social Darwinism, p. 119.

power to bring that America back.⁷⁷ The death of Darwinian individualism was, in short, a *conservative* moment, a continuation of the American consensus, not a step towards socialism or any other form of economic collectivism. And here we see Hofstadter's great distance from Beard. However logical the socialist challenge to *laissez-faire* might have been, it was quite literally inconceivable for all but an intellectual minority. Imprisoned within the frame of their cultural presuppositions, the masses could perceive the economic changes caused by big business only as evidence of the need to return to older, better ways. Contrary to Beard's view (or Marx's), history showed no gradual progress towards economic justice. Where Beard saw change, Hofstadter saw only stasis, continuity and consensus, fueled by an utter inability in most people to imagine an economic order different from the one they already knew.

A similar pattern is evident in the chapter on eugenics. Eugenics was in one way a clear departure from Darwinian individualism. It "accepted the principle of state action toward a common end and spoke in terms of the collective destiny of the group rather than of individual success."⁷⁸ But Hofstadter saw eugenics, like the rest of the reform period, as having an essentially conservative character. Its overall effect was to reinforce the existing class structure, by associating dysgenic traits with the urban working class.⁷⁹ Reform, in Hofstadter's picture, had little to do with social idealism, and much more to do with a middle class worried about its social prerogatives. Teeming, diseased, immigrant-filled urban slums struck the middle class as an existential threat. Eugenics gave measures to control this threat the veneer of scientific

⁷⁷ Social Darwinism, p. 120. Hofstadter strikes the same themes in his chapter on Wilson, "The Conservative as Liberal," in The American Political Tradition, p. 238-282.

⁷⁸ Social Darwinism, p. 167.

⁷⁹ "Early eugenicists tacitly accepted that identification of the fit with the upper classes and the unfit with the lower that had been characteristic of the older Darwinism. Their warnings about the multiplication of morons at the lower end of the social scale, and their habit of speaking of the fit as if they were all native, well to do, college trained citizens, sustained the old belief that the poor are held down by biological deficiency..." Social Darwinism, p. 163.

legitimacy. One could speak in noble phrases about saving the nation by preserving its “racial stock,” and some of the efforts to preserve that stock, such as compulsory education, rules on hygiene, or the abolition of child labor, were of real benefit to the poor. But at its root this movement was about control, about preserving the privilege and status of native-born, middle class Americans from the immigrant threat, and this aspect could be readily seen in other policies, such as compulsory schooling in English, prohibition of alcohol, forced sterilization, and in the opposition to trade unions, socialism and minimum wage legislation.⁸⁰ Eugenics, in short, was appealing precisely because it offered no real challenge to the existing social or economic order. On the contrary, it supported that order in the manner customary to Social Darwinism, by claiming that its provisions were sanctioned by natural law.

The rise of the United States as an imperial power led to a final expression of Social Darwinism that Hofstadter calls racial nationalism. Here, as ever, there was an ideological need to rationalize a form of predation, in this case the seizure of Spain’s empire and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China. Significantly, Hofstadter rejects the classical Marxist (and Beardian) view that these wars were fought on behalf of an owner class. There were trade issues at stake, such as opening Chinese markets and protecting shipping lanes, but according to Hofstadter neither business leaders nor the poor were in the forefront of the push for war. The ideologically decisive impetus came from the middle class.

It was not difficult to sell the middle class on the idea that their racial stock was biologically superior. This was, after all, what Americans had believed for as long as there had been an America. When John W. Burgess said that “political genius stamps the Teutonic nations as the political nations par excellence, and authorizes them, in the economy of the world, to assume

⁸⁰ Social Darwinism, p. 165.

the leadership in the establishment and administration of states,"⁸¹ his words were perfectly confluent with America's long tradition of racial justifications for slavery, for Indian dispossession and for the annexation of Mexican land. Social Darwinism *qua* imperialism fell easily into a well-worn cultural groove.

But that was only part of Hofstadter's explanation for middle class interest in imperial war. He said that war served another, psychological function. It responded to the fear that the closure of the frontier and the "softer" way of life brought on by industrialization and urbanization had led to the "enervation" of national character. War was just the kind of strenuous endeavor needed to restore "vigor" to the race. No voice spoke louder in service to this cause than Theodore Roosevelt: "We cannot avoid the responsibilities that confront us in Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines... The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man who has lost the great masterful fighting virtues, the ignorant man and the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills stern men with empires in their brains, all these, of course, shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties... I preach to you then, my countrymen, that our country calls not for the life of ease but for that of strenuous endeavor."⁸² There is a Freudian, hydraulic metaphor here, a sense that war gave vent to irrepressible emotional needs. Social Darwinism had the job of making these needs legitimate, indeed laudable. War is not shameful armed robbery on a national scale. It is the restoration of vigor, the answer to man's natural calling, and a sign of health and vitality. Imperialism was not, as Beard thought, economics with an ideological pretext. Nor was it even economics mediated through culture. What Hofstadter gives us here is

⁸¹ Social Darwinism, p. 175.

⁸² Social Darwinism, p. 180.

a political idea with an emotional and symbolic function, an analysis in which economics plays a decidedly secondary role.

My aim here has been to paint Social Darwinism as a book in which Hofstadter rejected large parts of Beard's historical method. Gone is the moralism, the narrow focus on economics, and the ham-fisted treatment of cultural context. But it may be that Social Darwinism is also evidence of Hofstadter's loss of the only faith he ever had, the Marxist belief in historical progress. A Marxist (or a Beardian) may be a scientific, empirical realist in his understanding of the causes of individual historical events, but if he has a teleological conception of the overall sweep of history, if he sees a long march towards justice for the poor or a classless society or any other culmination, he has left his realism and his scientism far behind. Beard and Marx were adherents to this last redoubt of faith, but Hofstadter was not. This is evident in Social Darwinism at many points in the narrative: Darwinian individualism was not a new way of life, just a new way of justifying the same, striving individualism that had long been the American norm. Darwinian collectivism, like the rest of Progressivism, was mostly conservative in its effects. Eugenics was about maintaining the existing class structure. Imperialism was a new vent for old racial attitudes and old aggressive impulses. There is, in Hofstadter's picture, no real change, just new ways of talking that obscure the essential continuity of social and economic structures. Social Darwinism is in this way a rehearsal for the theme of consensus that Hofstadter will develop at length in his next book, The American Political Tradition.

One feels that Beard and Hofstadter were looking at the same sordid realities, but responding to them in very different ways. In Beard, notes Hofstadter, there is a kinship to Jack London, an ability to depict a world of competitive, dog-eat-dog morality, and still see something noble shining through.⁸³ For Beard, the historian could amplify this natural light. He could be a part of

⁸³ Progressive Historians, p. 217.

progress, lifting mankind out of the muck. One sees in Hofstadter the same cynical take on the world with none of the hope or optimism, and thus no expectation that the historian could be anything more than spectator.

Sensitive to criticism that he had been unpatriotic and unduly acerbic in his portrait of the Framers, Beard replied that this had never been his intention. In treating the making of the Constitution “by the persistent association of ideas and interests,” Beard said, “do we not put men and women on guard against treating their own ideas as having the dogmatic force of divine revelation? Do we not aid mankind in emancipating itself from the idolatry of symbolism that is the essence of government by sheer force?”⁸⁴ This striking passage casts historical skepticism as a form of liberation. We can shed the “idolatry of symbolism” only when we are aware that our interests subtly and insensibly incline us to our beliefs, that the reasons we find to convince ourselves that we believe correctly are a purely *post facto* addendum, concocted long after our assent has been given.

Hofstadter offers a similar view in Social Darwinism. The whole history of Darwinism in America was one, long ghastly mistake, a persistent failure to see exactly what Beard had warned about, that interests had found a surreptitious legitimacy in Darwinism, and that the effect of this was to sanctify raw force and mutual predation as obedience to natural law. Social Darwinism had never been anything but bad science. The reading of social values from nature was like cloud watching or reading tea leaves. One found in nature whatever one wanted to see. It was different from traditional formulations of natural law only in its addition of the fresh horror of a modern, industrial fetish for expediency and efficiency. When natural law had been yoked to Christian humanism, human life was at least thought to have intrinsic value. Social Darwinism was natural law stripped of humanism and married to secular rationalism. It was a

⁸⁴ Progressive Historians, p. 219.

system whose only values were power, preservation, and successful competition. Obedience to natural law was a matter of harnessing each element of the social group to that role in which it would produce the greatest aggregate yield, and eliminating those elements who could not pull their weight. It was, in short, an amplification of what had always been the worst aspects of capitalism and its accompanying social ethic.

For Beard, the historian is something like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, a person who sees behind the thunderous rhetoric and reveals the befuddled, ridiculous old man at the microphone. When the historian shows the interests that lay behind ideas, those ideas lose their power. They can then be weighed with clarity, free from the “idolatry of symbolism.” But what if one takes a cultural turn like Hofstadter, and sees ideas as having their own, intrinsic power, independent of the economic factors that may have played a role in their genesis? What if ideas are indeed vessels of human aspiration, bound by symbolic connections to a vast complex of needs, fears and dreams? If that is what ideas are, it is no surprise that Hofstadter saw historians, and indeed all intellectuals, as superfluous to the inventory of the “public mind,” unable to change it by any means, much less by the Beardian tactic of revealing the connection of ideas to interests. Ideas serve far more than material needs, and this is part of why they are so stubbornly resistant to change. It is part of why the American consensus is not altered by novelties like Darwinism, but rather sucks those novelties in and bends them to its customary purposes. And it is part of why the historian cannot reasonably hope to be a part of social progress. In the end, nothing he says will make much difference to what an idea means and what it does for an ordinary person.

There is a poignant moment in Progressive Historians where Hofstadter describes Beard’s departure from the faculty of Columbia University. Beard supported World War I but was deeply troubled over the university’s efforts to censor some faculty members who took a more pacifist

approach. In a display of true courage and integrity, Beard wrote a scathing letter of protest and left his position. "On the same day, Beard announced his resignation to a large lecture class and told the students that this was his last appearance. They rose and saluted him with a volley of cheers that left Beard silent and overwhelmed, tears streaming down his cheeks."⁸⁵ Here, Hofstadter did not narrate with his usual blithe, knowing air. There was no suggestion that he saw the moment as mawkish or trite. Rather, he said, "it is on such courageous moments of self-assertion that the American tradition of academic freedom has been built." And yet, it is inconceivable to imagine Hofstadter doing the same thing. He would have been unable to summon enough faith that his self-sacrifice could make any real difference. And one might wonder, as Hofstadter himself surely did, whether this made him a wiser man than Beard, or just a lesser one.

⁸⁵ Progressive Historians, p. 287.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION

In this chapter I argue that The American Political Tradition can be read as a continuation of the critique of Progressive historiography that Hofstadter began in Social Darwinism. In Social Darwinism, Hofstadter portrayed American society as individualistic and predatory. Darwinism, shorn by Spenser of any traces of group cooperation or social morals, was attractive to Americans because it seemed to legitimate the value the system they already had. It was just capitalism buttressed by natural law. The embrace of Darwinism was universal. No economic class or major political group opposed it. Darwinism in America was thus a counterexample to the vision of the Progressive historians. There was no class war in which evolution functioned as an ideological weapon of the rich. Broad support for Darwinism, particularly among the middle class, reflected a capitalist ethos that was America's shared, national ideology. But Darwinism was just one idea, and its career could not by itself justify the rejection of the dualist, Progressive vision.

The American Political Tradition proved by enumeration what Social Darwinism proved by induction on a single case: there was no tradition of class conflict in the United States, no sustained opposition between the people and the interests, but rather a shared entrepreneurial culture that cut across class lines and proved remarkably resistant to change. Much as Darwin justified his claim about primordial species by piling example on example, observing "homologies" that could only be explained by a common origin, Hofstadter finds a commitment shared by each of the great figures in America's political tradition. Every one of them was a defender of bourgeoisie liberalism. This book is an odd adaptation of the muckraking style one finds, for example, in Beard's treatment of the Founding Fathers. Like the Progressive he was, Beard loved to tear the cover away from vice, to discover hidden cupidity in persons who

presented themselves as disinterested. Hofstadter took a similar approach, but applied this strategy of unmasking far more broadly than Beard or the Progressives would have liked.

Jefferson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt: in Hofstadter's narrative, these Progressive heroes were not class warriors, but pseudo-reformers. Beneath their egalitarian rhetoric lay a commitment to *laissez-faire* capitalism just as deep as one found in Hoover, Cleveland, or Harding.

The establishment of this negative thesis—there is no class conflict in the American political tradition—was Hofstadter's principal task in this book, but not the only one. He aimed to write a history of the idea of bourgeoisie liberalism, a story of its evolution from the Revolutionary period to the New Deal. Where the Progressives had seen American history as heroic, Hofstadter saw it as tragic. It was a story of stubborn adherence to ideas that once may have served America well, but no longer did after industrialization and urbanization. In contrast to Beard, for whom economic ideology mirrored utility and rational interest, there was something fundamentally irrational about America's economic conservatism. Most people believed that capitalism was fair, no matter how disproportionate its rewards. The capitalist ethos was impervious to change, even when new forms of business organization made its promise of equal opportunity little more than a sick joke. The American tradition, then, was not a war of haves vs. have-nots. It was a national pathology in need of diagnosis. How had capitalism become so deeply invested with values and feelings that no change in circumstances and no number of victims were sufficient to call it into doubt? "Economic interests," Hofstadter wrote, "are not always obvious or given; they have to be conceptualized and made the object of calculations or guesses. They have to be weighed against other kinds of interests, sentiments and aspirations. Ideas themselves constitute interests, in that they are repositories of past interests and that they present to us claims of their own that have to be satisfied."⁸⁶ Like a ship that drifts after its

⁸⁶ Progressive Historians, p. 245.

propulsion has been cut, the bootstrapping tradition of economic individualism proved impervious to any proofs of its inadequacy. It had become a “repository of past interest” that America was unable to question, much less forsake.

Hofstadter was not editorializing about the evils of capitalism. He aimed to diagnose the causes of America’s attachment to bourgeoisie liberalism, not to denounce it or argue for some socialist alternative. There is no normative, prescriptive conclusion to his argument in this text. His goal was a sort of mental archaeology, a historical analysis of what factors created America’s enduring attachment to *laissez-faire* and how that attachment has conditioned the exercise of political power. In his 1967 introduction to The American Political Tradition Hofstadter said he “had sense enough to know that I had not arrived at a point in my life at which I was either learned or settled enough to be ready to put together a synthetic statement about the meaning of the American political tradition.”⁸⁷ This was not exactly disingenuous, but neither was it completely accurate. The book is a series of individual biographical portraits, but the portraits fit together, as the title suggests, as parts of a single, enduring tradition. This book *did* offer a synthesis of American history.

The central pillar of that synthesis was the consensus thesis. Pressed by a publisher to help his readers find a connective thread between the various portraits, Hofstadter wrote his introduction, a brief six pages which he thought “made as much trouble for me as any other passage of comparable length.”⁸⁸ He said the American political tradition was united by a common economic ideology: “The range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise.... The sanctity of private property, the right of the individual to dispose of and invest it, the value of

⁸⁷ American Political Tradition, p. xxii.

⁸⁸ American Political Tradition, 1967 introduction, p. xii.

opportunity, and the natural evolution of self-interest and self-assertion, within broad legal limits, into a beneficent social order have been staple tenets of the central faith in American political ideologies; these conceptions have been shared in large part by men as diverse as Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Cleveland, Bryan, Wilson, and Hoover.”⁸⁹

To Arthur Schlesinger, the consensus thesis was so obvious as to be trivial. He agreed that the Progressive historians had overstated the usefulness of class conflict as a narrative frame and that whatever else America’s leading politicians may have argued about, they shared a common loyalty to Lockean liberalism.⁹⁰ He wondered, however, what use there was in pointing this out. “Mr. Hofstadter in his introduction happily resolves American political conflict into a shared belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition. One is almost tempted to ask why he did not add God, home, and mother, in which our political leaders doubtless also shared a belief.” Fortunately, adds Schlesinger, the portraits in the book do not connect to the rather “perfunctory” introduction. “Mr. Hofstadter,” he writes, “has clearly not given the same full and critical attention to the question of the American political tradition that he gave to the subjects of his various essays.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ The American Political Tradition. p. xxx.

⁹⁰ Lockean liberalism (which I will also call bourgeois liberalism) can be roughly defined as a set of negative liberties: the inalienability of property, freedom of speech and conscience, and freedom from political domination by a church or an aristocracy. The consensus thesis holds that political disagreement in America occurs within the boundaries of a shared loyalty to Locke. In Progressive Historians, Hofstadter offers a gloss of Louis Hartz to explain consensus: “The American Revolution itself was a colonial revolution only, marked by an astonishing traditionalism and legalism in its leading ideas... In the absence of feudal reactionary traditions and feudal patterns of dominance and submission, the principles of bourgeois liberalism, as embodied in the intellectual heritage of Locke, enjoyed here an almost exclusive control of the spectrum of political belief... The working class, so little affected by the dreams of socialism, became preoccupied with individualistic opportunity and advancement, not with class solidarity and class struggle... With so many of the elements of European class struggle missing, Americans delude themselves when they try to underline the acerbity of their class conflicts... All American thinking, except for a brief, luminous, creative but basically deluded reactionary episode arising out of the pro-slavery argument, is huddled around the Lockean center. The liberal community develops practically nothing but liberal thought. Its differences, intellectually speaking, are largely fabrications. The progressive historians have been almost comically credulous in taking them so seriously.” P. 446

⁹¹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. The American Historical Review, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1949, pp. 612-613.

Schlesinger was partly right. The consensus idea was not worked through systematically. Its formulation was so vague that some critics mistook it for work of conservatism, a patriotic celebration of America's freedom from ideological extremism and class conflict. In The Progressive Historians Hofstadter said that the book had its sources in Marx,⁹² so critics who took it as a piece of conservative cheerleading had clearly mistaken his intent. But how could it be a Marxist book if Hofstadter rejected the progressive claim that ideology was merely a foil for class interests, since this was also Marx's view of ideological causation?

Susan Scott Baker claimed that consensus was a Marxist concept because its development followed the pattern of dialectical materialism. The contradictions of capitalism led to a new synthesis (The New Deal) in which those contradictions were synthesized. FDR, on this reading, reinvented the state as a response to the failure of America's economic and political tradition. But that is not the story Hofstadter tells. The American tradition had indeed proved wholly inadequate to cope with the problems of industrial capitalism. The Great Depression had shown that beyond all doubt. But FDR's presidency was not the beginning of a new paradigm. It was, rather, a series of *ad hoc* experiments whose aim was to preserve the existing tradition.⁹³ The

⁹² "My own assertion of consensus history in 1948 had its sources in the Marxism of the 1930's." Progressive Historians, p. 452. He writes in a similar vein in the 1967 preface to The American Political Tradition, where he says the book "was a product of the social criticism of the 1930's, a book in which the American political tradition is being seen from a vantage point well to the left." P. xxi.

⁹³ FDR's "capacity for innovation in practical measures was striking, and the New Deal marked many deviations in the American course; but his capacity for innovation in ideas was far from comparable; he was neither systematic nor consistent, and he provided no clearly articulated break with the inherited faith." American Political Tradition, p. vii. Alan Brinkley praises Hofstadter as of the few scholars to grasp the New Deal's true character. FDR's presidency was a counter-reform period, where the issues of the twenties and early thirties (disaggregation of trusts, attacks on 'bossism' or machine politics) faded away. After the debacle of his failed attempt to pack the Court and catastrophic losses for the Democratic party in 1938 Congressional elections, "the critique of modern capitalism that had been so important in the early 1930's was largely gone... In its place was a set of liberal ideas essentially reconciled to the existing structure of the economy and committed to using the state to compensate for capitalism's inevitable flaws." Brinkley, Alan. The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 6. Brinkley's gloss comes from Ch. 7 of The Age of Reform, where Hofstadter argues that the New Deal was not the culmination of Progressivism or Populism, but rather worked against their conception of reform.

New Deal offered no sustained assault on monopoly or price fixing or income inequality or machine politics. Its contribution was a host of macroeconomic levers (e.g., social security, the G.I. Bill) designed to increase middle class spending power. By these means it aimed to resuscitate the old system, not replace it. These points suggest that Baker's thesis about Hofstadter's commitment to dialectical materialism was incorrect, but this again raises the question: in what sense was this a Marxist book?

T.J. Jackson Lears gave a more plausible answer when he suggested that consensus was an instrument of hegemony.⁹⁴ The concept of hegemony came from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who, like Marx, believed that the principal function of ideology was to legitimate owner class control of the state and to justify the coercion of the working class on occasions when they rejected their given role.⁹⁵ Unlike Marx, Gramsci saw bourgeoisie liberalism not as an upper class ploy, but as a set of interlocking conceptions—of history, human nature, economic necessity, and practical possibility—that were shared by all social classes and that together supported capitalism as the only rational and legitimate principle of social organization. Gramsci saw the United States as a country where workers enthusiastically endorsed the principles that legitimated their exploitation, while owners endorsed those same principles without seeing them as exploitative. For owner and worker alike, capitalism was fair in its distribution of opportunities and offered more prosperity to its citizens than any other social structure. This was how American capitalism sustained itself with such remarkable economy of force. There

⁹⁴ "To escape the dualisms of Progressive historiography, Hofstadter wanted to show how often the champions of the people collaborated in the entrepreneurial culture they claimed to transcend. For Hofstadter, who admired authentic dissent on the rare occasions he found it, the American political tradition was not pluralistic but hegemonic." Lears, T.J Jackson. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities." *American Historical Review*, v. 90, number 3, 1985, p. 576.

⁹⁵ Gramsci does not offer a canonical definition of hegemony, but in one passage defines it as the coordination of two factors, "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction of social life imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group..." and "the apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not consent, either actively or passively." *The Gramsci Reader*, New York: NYU Press, 2000, p. 307.

were no wicked plutocrats tricking the humble folk. The folk did not need to be tricked into accepting what they already believed. But how had that faith come to be? How did the middle and lower classes become enthusiastic supporters of a system that gave them so little?

This was the classic problem of why socialism had never flourished in the United States. Most historians identified a host of causative factors, such as the absence of a rigid class structure inherited from feudalism, widely distributed voting rights, the blunting of political discontent by westward migration, anti-statism and a mistrust of government capacity to mitigate unfairness, racial and anti-immigrant discord and consequent disunity in the working class, relatively high levels of land ownership and class mobility in comparison to Europe, and a socially egalitarian culture that scorned European rituals of deference and hence avoided European class prejudices. Hofstadter did not dismiss these factors but rather wanted to make a new contribution to the list. To him, the great protector of consensus was an American romantic nationalism, a sense that the United States was exceptional in its capacity to provide widely distributed opportunity, to reward merit with wealth, and to maintain fair competition. Hofstadter saw the Progressive historians as bearing some responsibility for this collective delusion. Their faith in democracy and progress, in the capacity of our political system to restore equality of opportunity whenever that equality was threatened (by slavery, by trusts), was part of what perpetuated capitalism by making its inevitable inequities appear to be temporary and remediable. Socialism had little appeal here because Americans thought they already had what socialism promised, a socially classless, anti-elitist society that could meet any threats to its liberty through a democratic political process. The Progressive historians were a part of why Americans thought this way. If hegemony is a set of pacifying delusions, then American exceptionalism was a part of that hegemony and the Progressive historians were complicit in its propagation. Their misreading of the American past as a series of class conflicts and their naïve

faith that expanded political participation would expunge unfairness obscured the more distressing truth that bourgeois liberalism had never been challenged here and that the source of unfairness was not “the interests” but rather mass support for capitalism.

Hofstadter was thus telling two stories at once. The first was a loose narrative of the history of consensus, an exploration of how this idea had become so entrenched in the American mind and so deeply connected to cherished values that its abandonment was literally unthinkable. The second was a running dialogue with the Progressive historians, a sustained refutation of their naïve view that American history was a perennial struggle on the part of “the people” to resist plutocratic rule.

The framing of the Constitution was the first chapter in Hofstadter’s dual story, and much of what he said here he owed to Beard: The Constitution was an instrument to protect the wealthy from the dangers of democracy. It was a reaction to dangerous signs of class upheaval seen in the Revolution and in Shay’s rebellion. It gave some power to the people but only enough to make them feel included, not so much that it would lead to mob rule, demagoguery, currency inflation, or the seizure of property.⁹⁶ It did not make any change to the existing class structure or economic system. All of this Beard got right. Where he erred was in treating the debate over the Constitution as a manifestation of class conflict. In Beard’s story, the Constitution capped a successful counter-revolution in which the wealthy managed to suppress a dangerous class insurgency.⁹⁷ This was one of the founding myths of progressive historiography, the legend of

⁹⁶ The framers “distrust of man was first and foremost a distrust of the common man and democratic rule. As the Revolution took away the restraining hand of the British government, old colonial grievances of farmers, debtors, and squatters against merchants, investors, and large landholders had flared up anew; the lower orders took advantage of new democratic constitutions in several states, and the possessing classes were frightened. The members of the Constitutional Convention were concerned to create a government that could not only regulate commerce and pay its debts but also prevent currency inflation and stay laws, and check such uprisings as the Shays Rebellion.” The American Political Tradition, p. 4

⁹⁷ In the revealingly titled chapter “Populism and Reaction” in The Rise of American Civilization, Beard said that the Constitution was the creature of “investors and speculators in public securities” who wanted to ensure that disasters like Shay’s Rebellion did not recur. Vol. 1, p. 311.

the “stolen revolution.” As he later would in The Progressive Historians, Hofstadter looked upon this myth with skepticism. He urged a more sensitive treatment of ideological factors (like traditions of 17th century English republicanism) that cut across class lines,⁹⁸ and agreed with framers’ self-characterization as political moderates.⁹⁹ He conceded to Beard that “the Fathers were especially fearful that the poor would plunder the rich,” but adds that “most of them would probably have admitted that the rich, unrestrained, would also plunder the poor.”¹⁰⁰ The Framers conceived of the system of balanced government as a way to protect all social classes. The Newtonian mechanism of balanced, counterpoised forces would make anything less than a dominant majority unable to exert power, and thus protect the liberties of both the wealthy and the poor.

So, if the Constitution was an instrument of economic domination, it was not a crude one, where the founders schemed to give the *demos* the illusion of power but not its reality, or legitimated their own authority by claiming to speak for the people while denying them any real say. In Hofstadter’s picture, the gentry genuinely sought a system that would give opportunity to the average man’s ambitions and voice to his discontents. There were some among the poor who saw the Constitution as an exploitative scheme, but Hofstadter thought these were rare and lonely voices. To Beard’s view that class-based antagonism to federalism defined the debate over the Constitution, Hofstadter responded that there was little such opposition. The poor accepted the new scheme almost as readily as the rich. Their acceptance came from their

⁹⁸ “The framers were the intellectual heirs of seventeenth-century English republicanism with its opposition to arbitrary rule and faith in popular sovereignty. If they feared the advance of democracy, they also had misgivings about turning to the extreme right.” The American Political Tradition, p. 5

⁹⁹ “The Fathers’ image of themselves as moderate republicans standing between political extremes was quite accurate. They were impelled by class motives more than pietistic writers like to admit, but they were also controlled, as Professor Beard himself has recently emphasized, by a statesmanlike sense of moderation and a scrupulously republican philosophy.” The American Political Tradition, p. 15

¹⁰⁰ The American Political Tradition, p. 8.

wanting the same thing as the rich, the opportunity to create wealth without state interference. The state would function as the guarantor of Lockean rights, most importantly, liberty from infringements on private ownership. Put simply, the state existed to protect an economic system that enjoyed nearly universal support: bourgeois liberalism.¹⁰¹

In the Progressive narrative, Jefferson's presidency was a resurgence of populism against plutocratic, Hamiltonian federalism.¹⁰² To Hofstadter, however, Jefferson was no class warrior. He not only supported consensus, he created a new mechanism to defend it, the myth of the reforming president who worked for the benefit of the common man. To the Progressive historians, Jefferson's presidency reengaged the same forces that had fought over the shape of the Constitution. They thought the Hamiltonian, wealthy, federalist faction had got its way with the Constitution, but that Jefferson's presidency had forced them into retreat. This was Beard's view, but it was Vernon Parrington whom Hofstadter cited in his footnotes as the representative Progressive voice. Parrington saw Jefferson and Hamilton as allegories of the dualistic opposition between the people and the interests: "Under the brilliant leadership of Hamilton the Federalists went forward confidently, gaining daily a firmer grip on the machinery of government, and establishing their principles in far-reaching legislative enactments. Their appeal to the wealthy classes, to those who made themselves audible above the clamor, was electrical... But the tide was already at the turn. The ideas let loose by the French Revolution

¹⁰¹ The founders "wanted freedom from fiscal uncertainty and irregularities in the currency, from trade wars among the states, from economic discrimination by more powerful foreign governments, from attacks on the creditor class or on property, from popular insurrection. They aimed to create a government that would act as an honest broker among a variety of propertied interests, giving them all protection from their common enemies and preventing any one of them from becoming too powerful... while they thought self-interest the most dangerous and unbrookable quality of man, they necessarily underwrote it in trying to control it. They succeeded in both respects: under the competitive capitalism of the nineteenth century America continued to be an arena for various grasping and contending interests, and the federal government continued to provide a stable and acceptable medium within which they could contend." The American Political Tradition, p. 12, p. 16.

¹⁰² Beard saw Jefferson's moves against the national debt, and the bondholders who benefitted from that debt, as evidence of his levelling tendencies. See The Rise of American Civilization, v. 1, ch. 8.

were running swiftly through America, awakening a militant spirit in the democracy. Antagonism to the aristocratic arrogance of Federalism, and disgust at its coercive measures, were mounting fast. If that inchoate discontent were organized and directed by a skillful leader, it might prove strong enough to thrust the Hamiltonian party from power. To that work Thomas Jefferson devoted himself with immense tact and untiring patience."¹⁰³

For Parrington, the American political tradition was pulled by two competing sets of ideals, the one liberal and democratic, the other conservative and elitist, the former embodied in the equalitarian sentiments of the Declaration of Independence, the latter in the Constitutional conception of the state as a neutral referee in an arena of economic contention: "Samuel Adams and other followers of Locke had been content with the classical enumeration of life, liberty, and property; but in Jefferson's hands the English doctrine was given a revolutionary shift. The substitution of "pursuit of happiness" for "property" marks a complete break with the Whiggish doctrine of property rights that Locke had bequeathed to the English middle class, and the substitution of a broader sociological conception; and it was this substitution that gave to the document the note of idealism which was to make its appeal so perennially human and vital. The words were far more than a political gesture to draw popular support: they were an embodiment of Jefferson's deepest convictions, and his total life thenceforward was given over to the work of providing such political machinery for America as should guarantee for all the enjoyment of those inalienable rights."¹⁰⁴

Hofstadter rejected this picture. For him, Jefferson's egalitarian rhetoric stood in stark contrast to his actions. Parrington made the mistake of taking Jefferson's self-appraisal at face value and vastly overstated his success in dismantling Hamilton's system: "The stereotype

¹⁰³ Parrington, Vernon. Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. 1, Bk. 3, ch. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Main Currents of American Thought, Vol. 1, Bk. 3, ch. 2.

perpetuated by such adherents of the Jeffersonian tradition as Claude Bowers and the late V. L. Parrington has been extremely popular. Jefferson has been pictured as a militant, crusading democrat, a physiocrat who repudiated acquisitive capitalistic economics, a revolutionist who tore up the social fabric of Virginia in 1776, and the sponsor of a "Revolution of 1800" which destroyed Federalism root and branch... If the changes were actually so important, one would expect bitter resistance. The truth is that the old institutions fell almost without a push... The explanation of this "revolution by consent" is simple: there was no revolution."¹⁰⁵

Jefferson never pushed for an expansion of suffrage, nor did he attempt to curb speculation in public lands.¹⁰⁶ His revolution was couched in words of opposition to privilege, but for him that meant the replacement of one privileged group with another. He sought to displace the Northeastern merchants and manufacturers who had formed the core of the Federalist coalition with a new alliance of planters and farmers.¹⁰⁷ Although he was convinced, along with all the liberals of his day, that government involvement in the economy inevitably served the rich, he made little effort to dismantle Hamilton's system of patronage. Jefferson saw his own achievements far more modestly than Parrington: "When this government was first established, it was possible to have kept it going on true principles, but the contracted, English, half-lettered ideas of Hamilton destroyed that hope in the bud. We can pay off his debts in fifteen years: but we can never get rid of his financial system. It mortifies me to be strengthening principles which I deem radically vicious, but this vice is entailed on us by the first error." Even if his goals were as radical as Parrington believed, by his own self-assessment, Jefferson's revolution was more

¹⁰⁵ The American Political Tradition, p. 18, 21.

¹⁰⁶ The American Political Tradition, p. 36.

¹⁰⁷ "Jefferson's party was formed to defend specific propertied interests rather than the abstract premises of democracy, and its policies were conceived and executed in the sober, moderate spirit that Jefferson's generation expected of propertied citizens when they entered the political arena." The American Political Tradition, p. 33.

rhetorical than real. To his horror, he “had driven the rival party completely off the field, but only at the cost of taking over its program.”¹⁰⁸

What Parrington missed was not just that Jefferson stood within the Lockean consensus, but that his political ideas legitimated *laissez-faire* capitalism. Jefferson’s most enduring prejudice was his ruralism. He believed that American democracy could not endure without a virtuous citizenry and that the life of the farmer was uniquely capable of producing such virtue. This agrarianism was inextricable from his attachment to *laissez-faire*. In Jefferson’s cosmology, the main impediment to a nation of farmers was an urban, mercantilist faction who used the state to parasitize the countryside through exorbitant taxation. Restore capitalism to its pure, *laissez-faire* form, and the main impediment to rural growth would thus be removed. Parrington characterized Jefferson as a physiocrat who wanted the state to work in favor of agriculture. This, Hofstadter points out, is exactly the opposite of what Jefferson wanted.¹⁰⁹ For Jefferson, *laissez-faire* was the indispensable basis for a thriving rural population and thus for the virtue that would sustain the republic.

To Hofstadter, this revealed a fundamental confusion in Jefferson’s thought, an inability to see that *laissez-faire* was not a democratizing force that would lead to capital disaggregation and the distribution of the population on small farms, but rather had the opposite tendencies, to concentrate capital, to urbanize, and to sharpen class distinctions. Jefferson strengthened consensus by supporting one of its key myths, that “pure” capitalism is productive of equality

¹⁰⁸ The American Political Tradition, p. 42.

¹⁰⁹ In an article from 1941, Hofstadter writes: Jefferson’s “remedy for agriculture’s troubles was simply a removal of government support of monopolistic financial institutions—in short, *laissez faire*. Although he had little use for Adam Smith, he was in essential agreement with the combination of governmental aloofness with reliance upon human self-interest which became such a staple of the Manchesterian creed. Declaring that love of property was the chief basis of civil society, he avowed his firm reliance in the idea that it is both wise and just, to leave the distribution of property to industry and talents. If such a policy were adopted, he believed, the dispersion of property would remain broadly democratic.” Hofstadter, Richard. “Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition.” Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1941, pp. 398.

and only produces inequality when the machinery of the state is used to give unfair advantage. Hofstadter compared Jefferson to another political thinker who suffered from similar delusions, William Leggett, leader of the New York Locofocos in the 1830's.¹¹⁰ Leggett's "opposition to the banking system was not the malcontent's hostility to all wealth, but the democrat's natural opposition to privileged monopolies instituted by law... His metaphysical faith in sufficiency of 'laws of trade' was, to say the least, naïve. Perhaps the fatal weakness in his thinking was his failure to assign any of the hardships of his day to the inherent disorders of a growing economic system, his tendency to trace all difficulties to an evil conspiracy on the part of the rich and well born."¹¹¹ Jefferson, like Leggett, could not see that the inequalities he deplored were the inevitable effects of the system he supported. Jefferson and Leggett shared a common fault. Their rhetoric obscured the inherent inequalities of capitalism by promoting the myth that a purified capitalism would serve the poor as well as the rich.

If Jefferson stood within consensus, why did Parrington paint him as opposing it? Parrington's strained portrait of Jefferson as a proto-Populist class warrior who adopted the radical equalitarianism of the French Revolution and the statist economics of the physiocrats was a typical Progressive mistake. Like Beard, Parrington projected his own moral dualism onto history.¹¹² In his own time he saw idealists and democrats ranged against cynical elitists, and was unable to see that his historical subjects might not fit into one of these two categories. Jefferson was a case in point. Neither democrat nor elitist, neither equalizer nor exploiter, he defied easy

¹¹⁰ He makes this comparison in "Parrington and the Jeffersonian Tradition," p. 400.

¹¹¹ "William Leggett, Spokesman of Jacksonian Democracy." Political Science Quarterly, vol. 58 no. 4, 1943, pp. 589, 593.

¹¹² "His point of view, Parrington explained in a disarmingly candid introduction, was 'liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic, and very likely on my search I found what I went forth to find, as others have found what they were seeking'." Progressive Historians, p. 418. Hofstadter ridicules Parrington's tendency to self-project, as when Parrington finds "French romantic theory spreading widely through the backwoods of America." p. 414.

categorization, but Parrington was looking for allies in history and could not help but abstract over those parts of Jefferson that did not fit the flattering mold he had prepared. The result was a history as unscientific as it was cramped and unsatisfying.¹¹³

By reading their own reform impulses into the past, the Progressives misunderstood the magnitude of the challenge they faced in opposing America's entrepreneurial culture. The press-gang method by which a Jefferson found himself enlisted in the cause, as a tavern patron might wake to find himself in the navy, misrepresented the power of consensus. Hofstadter's wish for a less projective kind of history was also a wish for the Left to face its problem squarely. There was no tradition of economic radicalism in America and no pattern of reforming presidents who carried that radicalism into policy. A fairy tale history spotted with heroes just added a further impediment to change by encouraging the false belief that the system was self-correcting. Entrepreneurism was America's national religion, shared by rich and poor alike. There were no presidents fighting for an outraged working class because there was no outraged working class. The wishful fantasies of the Progressive historians were like Jefferson's assault on impure capitalism, distractions that obscured the problem and so made it more difficult to combat.

Hofstadter's chapter on Andrew Jackson took the same deflationary tone. Again Hofstadter demoted a Progressive hero from sainthood, contrasting who he was with who he claimed to be. And again, the Progressive historians were seen as naïve, trusting the rhetoric while ignoring the lack of substance behind the words. Schlesinger's Age of Jackson portrayed the Jacksonian era as one of conflict between working and owning classes. It was not a shift in power from East to West, but a movement "whose ideas came from eastern working men and intellectuals." It

¹¹³ "Later struggles for democracy have something in common with earlier struggles for democracy—if indeed we can be sure that is what they actually were... In Parrington's history, however, the conviction of the similarity seems to have preceded the examination, and at times to have taken its place." Progressive Historians, p. 399.

anticipated the New Deal because it was struggle of working men against “business domination of the government.”¹¹⁴ Hofstadter offered a starkly different picture, painting Jackson not as a class warrior but as a parvenu aristocrat. After his military career, Jackson got rich by helping lenders squeeze debtors distressed by the Panic of 1819.¹¹⁵ In his presidential campaigns of 1824 and 1828, economic themes were barely mentioned.¹¹⁶ A “series of demagogic allegations about Adams’s alleged monarchist, bureaucratic and aristocratic prejudices” served Jackson for issues, while the election itself was “more an overturn of personnel than of ideas or programs.” As for his “popular mandate,” it was “to be different from what people imagined Adams had been, and to give expression to their unformulated wishes and aspirations.”¹¹⁷ Looking at the veto message with which Jackson killed the national bank, Hofstadter finds no trace of the “manifesto of anarchy” that Nicholas Biddle perceived, but rather a thorough and doctrinaire statement of faith in *laissez-faire*. There was no “philosophy of a radical leveling movement that proposes to uproot property or reconstruct society along drastically different lines... What is demanded is only the classic bourgeois ideal, equality before the law, the restriction of government to equal protection of its citizens. This is the philosophy of a rising middle class. Its aim is not to throttle but to liberate business.”¹¹⁸ As he did with Jefferson, Hofstadter compared Jackson to William Leggett. What all three shared was a faith in the power of *laissez-faire* to

¹¹⁴ Schlesinger, Arthur. Age of Jackson. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1945, p. 263. Donald Cole notes that “Hofstadter’s chapter on Jackson in The American Political Tradition (1948) would soon become the standard criticism of Schlesinger’s interpretation. In a 1945 review in New Republic, however, Hofstadter congratulated Schlesinger for his “intensive scholarship,” “mature insight,” and “analytical thinking,” and said the book offered “relief from more partisan myth-making histories in the manner of Claude Bowers.” “The Age of Jackson: After Forty Years.” Reviews in American History, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1986, pp. 149-159.

¹¹⁵ “The emergence of class conflict in Tennessee found him (Jackson) squarely on the side of the haves.” American Political Tradition, p. 52.

¹¹⁶ “The election of 1828 was not an uprising of the West against the East nor a triumph of the frontier... Nor was his election a mandate for economic reform. No financial changes, no crusade against the national bank, were promised.” American Political Tradition, p. 54

¹¹⁷ American Political Tradition, p. 54.

¹¹⁸ American Political Tradition, p. 61.

create equality of opportunity and a conviction that any unfairness derived from state interference in the economy, never from the capitalist system itself. As he did with Jefferson, Hofstadter looked beyond Jackson's rhetoric, which on occasion does strike notes of class struggle, to Jackson the practical politician, who was a dedicated apostle of *laissez-faire*. Like Parrington, Schlesinger put too much trust in the rhetoric, and found what he was looking for rather than responding to what he found.

Hofstadter did not just question the legend of Jackson as class warrior. He challenged the utility of class conflict as a way to understand the Jacksonian era. "It is too little appreciated," he wrote, that the Jacksonian era "was a phase in the expansion of liberated capitalism... and was closely linked to the ambitions of the small capitalist."¹¹⁹ Unlike the New Deal, which was premised on the end of economic growth, the Jacksonian period was a time of economic optimism, abounding in opportunities for the small businessman. "The typical American was an expectant capitalist, a hardworking, ambitious person for whom enterprise was a kind of religion, and everywhere he found conditions that encouraged him to extend himself." These men did not think of themselves as part of an economic class, and did not look to any sort of economic association for their advancement. Their ideal was the self-made man, the individualist who relied on no one and wanted nothing more from the state than to be left alone.¹²⁰

Hofstadter's atomized, individualistic vision of American social organization owed much to Tocqueville. Struck by the heterogeneity of American society, Tocqueville wrote a friend, asking "what serves as a tie to these diverse elements? What makes of them a people? Interest. That's the secret. Individual interest which sticks through at each instant, interest which, moreover,

¹¹⁹ American Political Tradition, p. 55.

¹²⁰ American Political Tradition, p. 47.

comes out in the open and calls itself a social theory. We are a long way from the ancient republics, it must be admitted, and yet this people is republican and I don't doubt it will long remain so."¹²¹ For Tocqueville, American society had an emergent order, not structured from above but from below, arising from the competitive interactions of millions of small entrepreneurs. United only in the attenuated sense of sharing a common desire for gain, American society did not need an organizing theory or an organizer. It was not a nation in the sense of a birthright community, a linguistic group, a common ethnicity or even an imagined community. None of the usual ways of thinking about nationhood quite applied here. What, then, was America's national identity? It was consensus, bourgeois liberalism, the pursuit of individual advancement made possible by the benign neglect of a caretaker state. Robert Weibe, who acknowledged Hofstadter as his most important intellectual influence, put the point this way: "Because each (social) unit... perceived economic challenge as a measure of its intrinsic merit, it presumed the right to choose its own route without interference from any other. A properly ordered society, therefore, would comprise countless, isolated lanes where Americans, singly and in groups, dashed like racers towards their goals."¹²² America, Weibe said, was not a nation in the traditional sense, but a space for parallel enterprises, a society at once defined by the segmentation of its elements, and by the unity of those segments in support of a basic system of ground rules—the Lockean consensus.

This economic agreement should not be mistaken for social harmony. Hofstadter did not say that Jacksonian America was made peaceful by the absence of class conflict, only that consensus formed a boundary for the conflicts that did occur, that whatever else Americans disagreed about, economic class *as political idea* never had much importance here. Hofstadter did not

¹²¹ Quoted in Diggins, John Patrick. On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

¹²² Weibe, Robert. The Segmented Society. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

deny the existence of economic classes. What he said was that the *idea* of class was simply outside of the average American's political consciousness. This was partly due to race. In the Jackson chapter (and again on the chapter on John C. Calhoun)¹²³, Hofstadter notes the close connection between consensus and racial identity, anticipating Edmund Morgan's thesis that slavery softened class distinctions between whites by giving "humbler whites a sense of status and all whites a community of interest."¹²⁴ But race was less important in Hofstadter's story than the myth of the self-made man, a cultural ideal that worked against the formation of class consciousness. Like race, this myth had a unifying function. It gave support to consensus because it implied that the economic system was fair. Wealth was a reward for personal merit, just as poverty was for vice.

Hofstadter did not analyze the bootstrapping myth in The American Political Tradition, but treated the topic in depth in his section on Turner¹²⁵ in The Progressive Historians. Turner's view of the economic culture of the frontier, like Tocqueville's, stressed individualism as its defining feature: "The frontiersman was ready to combine *ad hoc*, but 'the individual was not ready to submit to complex regulations...*Society became atomic*. The individual was exalted and given free play.' In another passage, Turner says, defining the 'ideal of individualism,' that the democratic frontier society 'was a mobile mass of *freely circulating atoms*, each seeking its own place and finding play for its own powers and for its own original initiative'."¹²⁶ Egalitarianism was the political counterpart of this economic atomicity. In the West, says Turner, one found democracy in its purest form, a "strong faith in the intrinsic excellence of the common man, in his right to make his own place in the world, and in his capacity to share in government." These

¹²³ American Political Tradition, p. 78.

¹²⁴ American Political Tradition, p. 47.

¹²⁵ Hofstadter cites Turner as his source when he claimed that the "self-made man" was the "ideal of frontier society," American Political Tradition p. 47.

¹²⁶ Progressive Historians, p. 143, italics Hofstadter's.

were the values Turner saw embodied in Andrew Jackson's political philosophy.¹²⁷ Jacksonian America was to him a kind of golden age, a standard of political and economic perfection by which to measure the insufficiency of all succeeding eras. Turner painted the era in roseate colors, as a time of "social comradeship," as a "neighborhood democracy based on good fellowship, sympathy and understanding,"¹²⁸ a vision colored by the moving experiences of his own youth in the Wisconsin wilderness.¹²⁹

Hofstadter noted not only the inaccuracy of this picture, but the destructive use to which it was put.¹³⁰ Turner "propagated his ideas during the Progressive era, at a time when insurgent democracy and reform cried out for a historical rationale."¹³¹ If the Jacksonian period was indeed a golden age, then it was also a regulative ideal. Progress meant movement toward the political and economic conditions of the frontier, namely egalitarianism and atomicity. For Hofstadter, Turner's synthesis was curious nexus of somewhat discordant strands, including the Progressive wish for expanded democracy, a traditionally American "romantic primitivism" in which nature offered escape and rejuvenation,¹³² and a Darwinian sensibility in which higher levels of development resulted from individual competition. This vision of progress emerging

¹²⁷ Progressive Historians, p. 127.

¹²⁸ Progressive Historians, p. 128.

¹²⁹ Hofstadter quotes Turner: "I have poled down the Wisconsin River with Indian guides, through virgin forests of balsam firs, seeing deer in the river—antlered beauties who watched us come with curious eyes and then broke for the tall timber...The frontier in that sense was real to me, and when I studied history I did not keep my personal experience in a water tight compartment away from my studies." Progressive Historians, p. 63.

¹³⁰ Turner's toxic legacy was a picture of the frontier in which all its ugliness had been removed. Americans longed for a return to frontier conditions because, like Turner, they chose to ignore how brutal frontier life really was: "While Turner was moved, and rightly so, by a feeling for the achievement of America, he had little countervailing response to the shame of it—to such aspects as riotous land speculation, vigilantism, the ruthless despoiling of the continent, the arrogance of American expansionism, the pathetic tale of the Indians, anti-Chinese and anti-Mexican nativism, the crudeness, even the near-savagery to which men were reduced on some portions of the frontier. He did not fail to acknowledge now and then the existence of such things, but he did neglect to write about them with specificity or emphasis." Progressive Historians, p. 104. See also p. 148.

¹³¹ Progressive Historians, p. 85.

¹³² Progressive Historians, p. 74.

from atomicity owed much to Herbert Spencer. Turner's unique contribution was to "forge a link between the Darwinian mentality of his era and the older mythology of Edenic America, joining hopes and aspirations that were as basic to the American outlook as they were poignantly self-contradictory and self-defeating."¹³³

Why self-defeating? Because like the Populist revolt of which he was a part, Turner's concept of progress was a form of reactionary false nostalgia, a wish to turn back the clock to an age that never was. To the threats of unbridled economic competition in the early decades of the 20th century, Turner wanted the still more unregulated conditions of the early decades of the 19th, in effect prescribing more of what caused the disease as its only possible cure.¹³⁴ Turner was aware that "a new America had come into being with the twentieth century: indeed, this was one of the implications of the exhaustion of free lands...Like most progressives, he was willing to endorse more governmental action to meet these problems... But the only particular suggestion he had for the times was breathtaking in its simplicity and insularity: it was the state university that would keep pioneer ideals alive, and translate them into the terms required by industrialism."¹³⁵ Here one gets a sense of the tragic dimension of Populism, its debilitating attachment to the past and consequent inability to imagine a future built on different terms. A prisoner of his sentiments, Turner could only respond to the problems of industrial America with the lame hope that the state university would keep the frontier spirit alive. What he failed to see was that keeping that spirit alive was the problem, not the solution. Like Parrington and Beard, Turner wanted to use history as a tool to achieve reform, but the effect of his synthesis

¹³³ Progressive Historians, p. 77.

¹³⁴ The conservative implications of the frontier thesis were not lost on the historians of the thirties, for whom "rural pieties" like agrarianism or frontier romanticism functioned as justifications for economic exploitation: "Turner's celebration of individualism rang false at a time when too many were suffering from the excesses of the individualists." Progressive Historians, p. 92.

¹³⁵ Progressive Historians, p. 110.

was to cloud the path of reform in the fog of nostalgia, and so make any real change that much harder to achieve.

The Jackson chapter is crucial in Hofstadter's story of the development of consensus. Jackson gave strength to the myth of the self-made man, presenting himself as the ultimate proof that the system was fair, that determination and ability would indeed be rewarded with wealth and power. His own life seemed to prove a comforting generalization: here in America, there are no social classes which constrain opportunity, only individuals whose boldness or lack of it give them precisely the life they have earned. He was walking proof that Lockean liberalism was good for the common man. Turner echoed these themes. The frontier was the pinnacle of American culture, and progress is therefore a return to frontier conditions. Here again, as with Jefferson and Parrington, a president and a historian work together to foster the same myth, that the only thing wrong with capitalism is that there is not enough of it, that the more purely atomistic and unregulated our society becomes, the more freedom and democracy it will provide. *Laissez-faire* is not just a condition for democracy, equality, and opportunity. It is the prerequisite of *justice*, of a system in which reward is proportionate to merit. At the end of Social Darwinism in American Thought, Hofstadter cautioned "rational strategists of social change" to restrain their optimism, to remember that receptivity to ideas is not a utility calculation but rather a result of confluence with existing intellectual preconceptions.¹³⁶ Here in the Jackson chapter, one sees those "preconceptions" take shape. Wrapped in the Edenic mythology of frontier bootstrapping, the Lockean consensus became deeply bound to the American sense of what was just and right. As America industrialized, and the consensus promise of equal opportunity grew ever more distant from reality, still consensus endured as

¹³⁶ Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. 204.

America's political ideal. It had become a "repository of past interests," a vessel for America's most deeply held values, and thus impervious to doubt.

Hofstadter's chapter on Lincoln was another exercise in deflation. Could a president who ended slavery, who put the liberty of man before the rights of property be called a defender of consensus? He certainly could in Hofstadter's story. Hofstadter's Lincoln did not challenge the American consensus. He did not represent the victory of a concept of the state in which it would further Jeffersonian pursuit of happiness, nor the defeat of the Whiggish "business interests" that were embodied in the Constitution. For Hofstadter, Lincoln was part of a struggle between two sorts of propertied interests, the South's slave economy, and in the North, a combination of working class whites who wanted new farms but did not want their wages lowered by the presence of negroes, and wealthy whites who saw opportunity for profit in the West, but felt those opportunities would not materialize if slavery were allowed to expand. The hagiography of Lincoln tends to paint him as a man who gave a new purpose and self-conception to America, who justified the slaughter of the war by saying it brought forth a new birth of freedom and equality. For Hofstadter, the war was not revolutionary but restorative. It put down a minority that was perceived to have threatened two core elements of the ruling consensus, democratic rule and the opportunity (for whites) to rise in economic class. Judged in light of its aftermath in the Gilded Age, it was not a new birth of freedom but the prelude to a new era of exploitation. The principles for which Lincoln supposedly fought, the right of every man to retain the fruits of his labor and to raise himself in proportion to his merit, would there be perversely used to justify limitless accumulation and to defend obscene wealth as the natural reward of intrinsic superiority.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ "Had he lived to seventy, he would have seen the generation brought up on self-help come into its own, build oppressive business corporations, and begin to close off those treasured opportunities for the little man. Further, he would have seen his own party become the jackal of the vested interests, placing

Hofstadter's portrait of Lincoln was different from the economic reductionism of the Progressives. Like them, he saw the war as a clash between forms of property. Unlike them, he did not see it *merely* as that, nor did he flatten out the importance of the ideological struggle by turning Lincoln into the avatar for some form of property. There is a view of the war in which the ideological struggle was mere noise, while the real story was one of money and power. In the introduction to Patriotic Gore, for example, Edmund Wilson compared the war to a large sea slug swallowing a smaller one. The analogy was strained, Wilson conceded, but only because the slug lacks the capacity to rationalize his appetite in the name of civilization: "Hence the self-assertive sounds which he (man) utters when he is fighting and swallowing others: the songs about glory and God, the speeches about national ideals." Beard, too, had infamously dismissed the ideological dimension of the war as a cover for "hard" interests. And since Hofstadter deflated the myth of Lincoln the redeemer, it is easy to mistake his view as akin to Wilson's or Beard's.

The critic John Diggins makes just this mistake: "So absorbed was Hofstadter in his own vision of consensus that he treated Lincoln less as a moralist than as an opportunist—one who dared not challenge public opinion, a professional politician looking for votes, a historical figure who must be judged among the world's great political propagandists... In opposing the expansion of slavery instead of condemning it outright, which according to Hofstadter Lincoln only did to appease the abolitionists, Lincoln in his view avoided taking a moral stance. Instead he appealed to the self-interest of Northern laborers whose economic position would be threatened if

the dollar far, far ahead of the man. He himself presided over the social revolution that destroyed the simple equalitarian order of the 1840's, corrupted what remained of its values, and caricatured its ideals. Booth's bullet, indeed, saved him from something worse than embroilment with the radicals over Reconstruction. It confined his life to the happier age that Lincoln understood—which unwittingly he helped to destroy—the age that gave sanction to the honest compromises of his thought." American Political Tradition, p. 107.

slavery moved out of the South. Hence the struggle between slavery and anti-slavery merely represented two forms of property."¹³⁸ To Diggins, Hofstadter scolded Lincoln for making moral compromises, and took these compromises as evidence that Lincoln was the tool of propertied interests.

But that was not the story Hofstadter told in this chapter. Lincoln was not rebuked for his lack of moral courage, but rather admired for his ability to find a rhetoric that could unify the disparate interests of the North without alienating any of its subgroups. This was no small balancing act, and Hofstadter gives credit to Lincoln's achievement.¹³⁹ Lincoln was not a moral coward, but rather showed how a great and difficult task, a coercive war against a people who wanted only to be left alone, could be accomplished through the masterful use of rhetoric. It is within this rhetoric that one must look to find the story of consensus. Lincoln created the will to war by convincing the North that the South did not just want independence, but rather aimed to destroy the nation's founding principles. The war, therefore, was not one of aggression, but a defensive campaign to protect the national consensus. Lincoln was not a tool of propertied interests. But he was a master manipulator. His presidency was not an episode in an ongoing struggle between workers and owners, but rather another moment when the disparate interests of these two groups were portrayed as the same. The war against the South was a war against the enemies of free enterprise. Protect free enterprise, and you protect the interests of both owners and workers. Lincoln's presidency, in short, was yet another chapter in the development of consensus' hegemonic power.

¹³⁸ Diggins, John Patrick. On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History, p. 25.

¹³⁹ "In addition to abolitionists and Negrophobes, it united high- and low-tariff men, hard- and soft-money men, former Whigs and former Democrats embittered by old political fights, Maine-law prohibitionists and German tipplers, Know-Nothings and immigrants. Lincoln's was the masterful diplomacy to hold such a coalition together, carry it into power, and with it win a war." American Political Tradition, p. 117.

Lincoln's first great challenge was to find a rhetorical formula that could appease the abolitionists, while not offending the far more numerous negrophobes who feared wage competition from freed slaves. He solved this problem by promising to stop slavery's expansion but also to leave it alone in states where it already existed.¹⁴⁰ Here one had a sop to abolitionists, to whom he could rightly say that he had stood up to the Slave Power, and an assurance to whites that they would not have to endure the unwelcome addition of blacks to their communities. But Lincoln knew this was not enough. To deny slavery's expansion, the South had made clear, was to cause disunion, and Northern voters hesitated to take this momentous step. To stiffen their resolve, Lincoln employed a form of politics that Hofstadter would later call the paranoid style.¹⁴¹ The Slave Power, he alleged, would never be content until slavery had become legal in every state. The issue was not just whether it would come to Missouri and Kansas, but whether it would be forced on Massachusetts and New York. The Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision gave every indication that events were headed in this direction.¹⁴² Nor could white people feel safe that they, at least, would not be slaves. If

¹⁴⁰ "As a practical politician he was naturally very much concerned about those public sentiments which no statesman can safely disregard. It was impossible, he had learned, safely to disregard either the feeling that slavery is a moral wrong or the feeling—held by an even larger portion of the public—that Negroes must not be given political and social equality." American Political Tradition, p. 111.

¹⁴¹ David Brion Davis credits Hofstadter, but not the Lincoln chapter specifically, for showing him that paranoia was a crucial element in building ideological support for the war: "Hofstadter suggests that a latent tendency to perceive the world in paranoid terms has been periodically aroused by sudden conflicts of interest which have been felt to be irreconcilable. The paranoid style would thus appear to be a psychological device for projecting various symbols of evil on to an opponent and for building emotional unity through a common sense of alarm and peril." The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style. Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1969, p. 4.

¹⁴² During the debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln charged that "Douglas himself was involved in a Democratic 'conspiracy ... for the sole purpose of nationalizing slavery.' Douglas and the Supreme Court (which a year before had handed down the Dred Scott decision) would soon have the American people 'working in the traces that tend to make this one universal slave nation.' Chief Justice Taney had declared that Congress did not have the constitutional power to exclude slavery from the territories. The next step, said Lincoln, 'would be another Supreme Court decision, declaring that the Constitution of the United States does not permit a State to exclude slavery from its limits... We shall lie down pleasantly, dreaming that the people of Missouri are on the verge of making their State free; and we shall awake to the reality instead, that the Supreme Court has made Illinois a slave State.'" American Political Tradition, p. 115.

slavery were the positive good that people like John C. Calhoun and George Fitzhugh claimed it was, if it gave workers a better life than they enjoyed in the factories of the North, then why not extend slavery to whites? Hofstadter admitted that Lincoln was stoking fears “without factual foundation,”¹⁴³ but acknowledged the wisdom of his moves. Northern workers simply did not care about the sufferings of black slaves. They did care about slaves coming to their states, and about the prospect of being a slave, and this is what stirred them to act. Personal liberty and the right of workers to profit from their labor were core elements of the Lockean consensus. Only when these elements were alleged to be under threat could Northern opposition to the expansion of slavery finally harden into determined resolve.

After 1860, Lincoln faced his second great challenge, to maintain the North’s determination to fight and win the war. Again, he found the right rhetoric by positioning himself as the defender of consensus. He maneuvered the South into firing the first shots at Fort Sumter, giving him the latitude to claim, rather absurdly, that it was the South who had pushed for war.¹⁴⁴ Nor was it just the government of the North that the South was attacking. It was democracy itself. Hofstadter quoted Lincoln: “The people must now demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly win an election can defeat a rebellion, and that the power of government which has been honestly lost by ballots cannot be won back by bullets. Such will be a great lesson of peace: teaching men that what they cannot take by an election, neither can they take it by a war.”¹⁴⁵ Never mind that the South had adopted a democratic constitution, nor

¹⁴³ American Political Tradition, p. 118.

¹⁴⁴ “This realistic bit of statecraft provides no reason for disparaging Lincoln, certainly not by those who hold that it was his legal and moral duty to defend the integrity of the Union by the most effective means at his command. The Confederate attack made it possible to picture the war as a defensive one... What the North was waging, of course, was a war to save the Union by denying self-determination to the majority of Southern whites. But Lincoln, assisted by the blessed fact that the Confederates had struck the first blow, presented it as a war to defend not only Union but the sacred principles of popular rule and opportunity for the common man.” American Political Tradition, p. 123, 126.

¹⁴⁵ American Political Tradition, p. 125.

that Jefferson had affirmed the natural right to rebel, if self-determination were denied. In Lincoln's alchemy, they had attacked another core element of consensus, the democratic principle of majority rule. They were, in his reading, an oligarchic minority determined to impose their will upon an unwilling majority, the antithesis of government by and for the people.

As the war went on, public opinion in the North became increasingly radical. No longer content to confine slavery to the South, more and more Northerners demanded abolition as punishment to those who had spilled so much Northern blood and to ensure that no similar war would trouble the nation's future. Lincoln's next great challenge was to appease these radicals without alienating the border states. The Emancipation Proclamation struck this balance, freeing slaves but only in the rebellious states, proclaiming not a natural right to freedom but the right of a nation at war to deny a crucial resource to the enemy. The proclamation had, in Hofstadter's wry terms, "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading...The Proclamation was what it was because the average sentiments of the American Unionist of 1862 were what they were. Had the political strategy of the moment called for a momentous human document of the stature of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln could have risen to the occasion. Perhaps the largest reasonable indictment of him is simply that in such matters he was a follower and not a leader of public opinion."¹⁴⁶

One sees here that Hofstadter did not blame Lincoln for passivity or a lack of moral courage. Lincoln was as passive as he had to be and as courageous as he could be within the limits of political possibility. In his sensitivity to the racial prejudices of Northern whites and in his shrewd exploitation of their fears, Lincoln appears not as an opportunist, but ironically, as a kind of slave, repeatedly constrained to act and speak in ways that were contrary to his inclination. Lincoln's great virtue was his humility. He accepted his own powerlessness with rare

¹⁴⁶ American Political Tradition, p. 132.

equanimity.¹⁴⁷ Hofstadter uses this aspect of Lincoln's story to say something more general about consensus. Just as Lincoln was bound to obey the mass of public opinion, to lead it just as far as it was willing to go and no farther, so is any president limited in his rhetorical possibilities by the accepted, settled wisdom that constitutes the American political tradition. Presidential rhetoric sustains consensus, and sometimes, as in the case of Lincoln, elevates it to the status of holy writ. But this is not the top-down, brainwashing, mind-control implicit in the Marxist notion of false consciousness. It is a necessary coordination between leaders and people in a democratic nation where presidents must mirror the popular mood if they wish to win elections or gain support for their policies. A successful rhetoric defers to enduring elements of the American political tradition. It can create something new only by painting it as the preservation of what is old. Seen in this way, consensus is not merely a boundary of dispute, nor just a set of agreed upon principles. It is a language of power, a way for presidents to create change within a society that is willing only to preserve what it knows and trusts. This, perhaps, is what Schlesinger did not see when he dismissed consensus as a mere statement of the obvious. Hofstadter's goal, particularly here in the Lincoln chapter, was not just to enumerate shared platitudes, but to make a claim about power in American politics, to assert that consensus limits the possibilities of presidential rhetoric while it also provides a language within which a president can argue for change.

Hofstadter's chapter on the Gilded Age frankly admitted that this was a time when consensus was under strain. There were repeated outbreaks of labor violence like the Pullman and Homestead strikes. The mystery, for Hofstadter, was that consensus could withstand this test. What were the ideological factors that explained its power to endure?

¹⁴⁷ "The great prose of the presidential years came from a soul that had been humbled. Lincoln's utter lack of personal malice during these years, his humane detachment, his tragic sense of life, have no parallel in political history." American Political Tradition, p. 134.

The owner class found in Darwin a rationale for their rapacity, a theory of consensus not just as a national tradition, but as natural law. Like Jackson, they were walking, breathing evidence that the system worked. Many of the great barons had begun their lives as poor men, and if they could rise through their merits, so could anyone. Never mind that competition in an age of trusts required capital far beyond the reach of most men. No obstacle was too great for a man with drive and determination.¹⁴⁸ To want help from the government was to be but half a man. There had always been a gender component to consensus, a connection between bootstrapping and masculinity. Social Darwinism grafted neatly onto this foundation. Ruthless economic competition was seen not only as properly masculine, but as natural and necessary. Conversely, the reform impulse was seen as the province of women, and when it appeared in men, as a sign of effeminacy and weakness.¹⁴⁹ In the new Darwinian synthesis, reform was not only womanly, but against the will of nature. The state should not effect a scheme of redistribution or even provide aid to the poor because their sufferings were necessary if the unfit were to be eliminated and the strong were to survive. Similarly, the state had no business regulating practices like monopoly or price fixing or labor exploitation. These practices were part of the natural and beneficial striving for self-improvement that led to social progress.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ The barons “stood squarely upon the American mythology of opportunity for the common man. The great industrial leaders had started life in the lower or lower-middle classes; most of them could point to early careers of privation, hard work, and frugality. When Andrew Carnegie declared at the close of the period that ‘the millionaires who are in active control started as poor boys and were trained in the sternest but most efficient of all schools — poverty,’ he could cite, besides his own case, over a dozen other eminent industrialists.” American Political Tradition, p. 166.

¹⁴⁹ “The isolation of the reformers was as characteristic as the cynicism and corruption of the regulars. Party warhorses, who tended to identify rapacity with manliness, looked upon “good” men in politics as dudes, freaks, immune to the spirit of their time not out of virtue but perversity—“man milliners,” as Conkling said in his famous diatribe.” American Political Tradition, p. 176.

¹⁵⁰ “The ideas of the age were tailored to fit the rich barons. Economists, journalists, educators, and writers who rushed to do them honor found a strikingly plausible rationale in Darwinian biology and Spencerian philosophy, which were growing every year more popular... The bitter strife of competitive industry, which seemed to mirror so perfectly Darwin's natural world, was producing a slow but inevitable upward movement of civilization. Those who emerged at the top were manifestly the fittest to survive and carry on.” American Political Tradition, p. 168.

One can see the appeal of this vision to the successful capitalist, but middle and working-class voters tended to view things in much the same way. Evolutionary science gave an aura of legitimacy to the *laissez-faire* state, and all social classes accepted the connection between masculinity and independence. More than this, all classes shared in the scramble for wealth, and none were particularly scrupulous about how they acquired it. That Oakes Ames, one of the main perpetrators of the Credit Mobilier scam, could unapologetically state that he had used his office to enrich himself and have that explanation accepted by most people, showed that the hunger for money and the lack of moral restraint in the getting of it were widely shared American values. Nobody condemned Oakes because no one in his place would have let such an opportunity pass by.¹⁵¹ If the middle class shared the entrepreneurial aspirations of the rich, the poor looked to politics with their own kind of cynicism. They did not expect politics to be honest. They just wanted some of the fruits of corruption to fall to them.¹⁵² The alacrity with which they sold their votes was itself a kind of entrepreneurship, an effort to make their one meager asset yield the greatest possible return.

For Hofstadter, then, the failure of the reform impulse in the Gilded Age was a consequence of its conflict with widely-shared entrepreneurial values. All social classes participated in the scramble for wealth, which they saw as properly manly and sanctioned by natural law. Strikers or labor militants could expect little success in this climate of opinion. No strike could succeed in the face of armed intervention by the state, and in a nation where consensus ruled, the use of

¹⁵¹ Oaks explained that "it was to be expected that Congressmen would use their political power to look after their own investments, and there was nothing untoward about the whole proceeding. A defense like this was made in confidence that a large segment of public opinion would sustain such conceptions of political morality." American Political Tradition, p. 171.

¹⁵² "Single-minded concern for honesty in public service is a luxury of the middle and upper classes. The masses do not care deeply about the honesty of public servants unless it promises to lead to some human fruition, some measurable easing of the difficulties of life. If a choice is necessary, the populace of an American city will choose kindness over honesty, as the nation's enduring Tammanys attest." American Political Tradition, p. 177.

force to break strikes was accepted as proper and necessary. Ideologically isolated because they stood outside consensus, strikers stood in the same position as dissenting intellectuals, scorned by a nation that had little sympathy for their point of view.

To read Charles Beard on the reform era is like being present at a Roman triumph. The list of Progressive accomplishments moves past like a succession of captured barbarian chiefs, leaving the impression that this was the era when the plutocracy finally lost control of the nation. Protection of natural resources, laws against impure foods and drugs, direct election of senators and other moves towards direct democracy, anti-trust legislation in the form of the Clayton act, the creation of the FTC, an eight hour day for railroad workers: all these accomplishments testified to the “final breach of the philosophy of let us alone,” and the final defeat of “that system of enjoyment and acquisition in which a few, high beneficiaries, under varied forms and phrases, ruled the country.”¹⁵³ Much of the credit went to Wilson and Roosevelt. Roosevelt “was the first president who openly proposed to use the powers of political government for the purpose of affecting the distribution of wealth in the interest of the golden mean.”¹⁵⁴ Wilson “put an iron hand upon his party in Congress, and, before he laid down his office, gave the country legislation conceived principally in the interests of small folk, planters, farmers, and organized labor.”¹⁵⁵ For Beard, then, the reform era was the end of the *laissez-faire* consensus and the beginning of what he called a “social democracy.”

Hofstadter saw things differently. The reform era was not an end to consensus, but in some ways a strengthening of it. The great reformers—Bryan, Roosevelt, Wilson—were not revolutionaries, but rather remained firmly loyal to America’s traditional consensus. Most of the legislation they created did not overturn the power of the plutocracy, but was rather

¹⁵³ Beard, Charles and Mary. *The Rise of American Civilization*, v. 2, ch. 17, p. 589, 591.

¹⁵⁴ Beard, Charles and Mary. *The Rise of American Civilization*, v. 2, ch. 17, p. 596.

¹⁵⁵ Beard, Charles and Mary. *The Rise of American Civilization*, v. 2, ch. 17, p. 607.

conservative in intention and effect. Hofstadter used each man to represent a distinct strand of the reform impulse, but all three demonstrated the same principle of power that he first explained in his portrait of Lincoln. Each understood that change could only be accomplished in the name of preservation. The only way to overcome America's robust tradition of anti-statism was to claim that her traditional ways had come under threat, and that a temporary increase of state power was necessary to restore the old equilibrium.

William Jennings Bryan did not just promote the interests of the West. He embodied their prejudices, their intellectual limitations and their political ineptitude.¹⁵⁶ He saw it as his duty as well as his inclination to fight for just those issues that his constituents saw as important, even if those issues had only regional appeal, and even if circumstances changed so as to render those issues moot. There was some truth in Bryan's belief that government and high finance had set their power against the West. By the 1890's a thirty-year deflationary trend had greatly increased the debts of impoverished farmers. Bryan blamed the Eastern financial interests for their tenacious defense of the gold standard, and the government for their prohibition of coinage in silver. To his constituents, free silver was the panacea that would solve all their problems. Led by his naïve faith that the people could not be wrong, Bryan fixated on "free silver" as his core issue. The problem was that outside the West, few doubted the necessity of the gold standard.¹⁵⁷ In the election of 1900, he did not need the silver issue to win the West, but by holding so firmly to it, he lost whatever chance he had of winning the Eastern states.

¹⁵⁶ "Bryan's hold on the West lay in the fact that he was himself the average man of a large part of that country; he did not merely resemble that average man, he was that average man." American Political Tradition, p. 187.

¹⁵⁷ "In 1896 free silver ranked among the heresies with free love. Except in the farm country, wherever men of education and substance gathered together it was held beneath serious discussion. Economists in the universities were against it; preachers were against it; writers of editorials were against it. For almost forty years after the campaign was over, the single gold standard remained a fixed star in the firmament of economic orthodoxy, to doubt which was not merely wrong but dishonest." American Political Tradition, p. 188.

Bryan's natural allies were the workers of the cities, but he never cultivated their good will, nor did he formulate a plan to deal with the problems of industrial labor.¹⁵⁸ He often voiced his view that farmers were virtuous producers upon whom the urban population was parasitic, which pleased the farming men who were already going to vote for him, while alienating the urban voters without whom he could not win.

Bryan's political failure was a logical consequence of his regional appeal. But Hofstadter pushed deeper, asking what explained the Western fixation on free silver. The answer he found was that Bryan, like his constituents, remained firmly in the grip of the American consensus,¹⁵⁹ and so could not see that solving problems like monopoly in farm equipment production or exorbitant railroad rates required not just an expansion of the currency supply, but a larger regulatory role for the state. The tragedy of Populism was its inability to see that the atomistic myth of the frontier had reached the end of its useful life.¹⁶⁰ They thought of the West as the victim of a grand conspiracy, and so they wanted only to be left alone. What they could not see is that being left alone was itself the problem. It was unchecked economic individualism in the form of unrestrained corporate predacity that had drained off much of their wealth. But to admit this was a conceptual impossibility. It would have meant a rejection of *laissez-faire* and with it, a rejection of the belief that individual drive and initiative were sufficient to create

¹⁵⁸ Bryan "did not go far out of his way to capitalize the bitter working-class discontent of the campaign year. Subsequently he was friendly toward labor, but he never sponsored a positive program of labor legislation, and it is doubtful that he had any clear conception of the trials of working-class existence." American Political Tradition, p. 190.

¹⁵⁹ "The majority of the people, he declaimed, who produced the nation's wealth in peace and rallied to its flag in war, asked for nothing from the government but "even-handed justice." Several writers have argued that Bryanism marked the beginning of the end of *laissez-faire* in the United States, but this is true only in the most indirect and attenuated sense. The Democratic platform of 1896 called for no sweeping restrictions of private enterprise; none of its planks required serious modification of the economic structure through government action. Most of its demands, on the contrary, can be summed up in the expression: Hands off." American Political Tradition, p. 192

¹⁶⁰ "After one hundred years of change in society the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian philosophy was intact. To those who accept that philosophy, this will appear as steadfastness of faith; to those who reject it, as inflexibility of mind." American Political Tradition, p. 192.

prosperity. This was farther than they were able to go. What Bryan could not see was that the real opponent of reform was not a stubborn plutocracy, but rather the limitations of the reformers themselves, whose efforts to ameliorate capitalism would always remain crippled by their loyalty to the American consensus.

There are not many places in the book where Hofstadter's tone becomes sneering or contemptuous, but there is a bitter edge in the chapter on Bryan. Bryan's sanctimonious shortsightedness, his utter conviction that the simplistic and anachronistic worldview of his constituents could not be wrong, that their economics and politics were better simply because they were a morally superior kind of people,¹⁶¹ seems to have struck Hofstadter as a typically American combination of rural stupidity and smugness. Bryan's pathetic denouement as prosecutor in the Scopes trial was in this sense reflective of his whole political life. Here again he showed his utter lack of detachment from public opinion. If the people of Tennessee disliked Darwin, then it was Bryan's job to expunge Darwin from the schools.¹⁶² He was a perfect democrat, a faithful voice of his supporter's views, and that was the problem. His narrow-minded self-satisfaction was their narrow-minded self-satisfaction. This chapter, then, is not just an indictment of Bryan, but of the people he represented, and to at least some extent, of democracy itself. The great article of faith in all the Progressive historians, and even in Wendell Phillips, whom Hofstadter clearly admired, was their faith in democracy, their conviction that a greater voice for the people would produce a better and more just society. The Bryan chapter

¹⁶¹ "It was inconceivable that the hardworking, Bible-reading citizenry should be inferior in moral insight to the cynical financiers of the Eastern cities. Because they were, as Bryan saw it, better people, they were better moralists, and hence better economists." American Political Tradition, p. 191.

¹⁶² "His defense of the anti-evolution laws showed that years of political experience had not taught him anything about the limitations of public opinion. The voice of the people was still the voice of God. The ability of the common man to settle every question extended, he thought, to matters of science as well as politics and applied equally well to the conduct of schools as it did to the regulation of railroads or the recall of judges or the gold standard." American Political Tradition, p. 191.

challenges this. Implicitly, Hofstadter asks us: are *these* the people from whom you expect so much? *These* are the voices to whom we must listen, if we would build a better nation? It is not just Bryan's naivety that is ridiculed here, it is the very idea that expanded democracy could produce reform. How could it, if the rural mind is focused not on the need for something new, but on the return to a sentimentalized past that never really existed?

The chapter on Theodore Roosevelt again strikes a somewhat bitter tone. Here was another Progressive hero whose reputation as a reformer far exceeded his achievements. Although remembered as the president who first used state power as an instrument to help the working class, he did so reluctantly and with contempt towards those whom he helped: "If Roosevelt was in revolt against the pecuniary values of 'the glorified huckster or pawnbroker type,' it was not from the standpoint of social democracy, not as an advocate of the downtrodden. He despised the rich, but he feared the mob. Any sign of organized power among the people frightened him... The most aggressive middle-class reformers also annoyed him. Until his post-presidential years, when he underwent his tardy but opportune conversion to radicalism, there was hardly a reform movement that did not at some time win his scorn."¹⁶³ During the Pullman strike Roosevelt wrote to Brander Matthews: "I know the Populists and the laboring men well and their faults. ... I like to see a mob handled by the regulars, or by good State-Guards, not over-scrupulous about bloodshed." Roosevelt had prospered in the Republican party for sentiments just like these. Progressive historians who saw him as the working man's president vastly overstated what little sympathy he showed for the plight of labor.

Roosevelt was occasionally willing to stand up to the trusts. But this was an expression of his conservatism. Roosevelt thought of himself as saving capital from its own shortsightedness. His trust-busting efforts, such as the Northern Securities case, were more symbolic than

¹⁶³ American Political Tradition, p. 209.

substantive. Their purpose was to give working men *the impression* that he was their ally, and to caution big business against egregious forms of excess, without making any important changes to the *status quo*. To Hofstadter, "Roosevelt's chief contribution to the Progressive movement had been his homilies, but nothing was farther from his mind than to translate his moral judgments into social realities, and for the best of reasons: the fundamentally conservative nationalist goals of his politics were at cross-purposes with the things he found it expedient to say."¹⁶⁴

Roosevelt often positioned himself a neutral arbiter, a referee over disputes between owners and workers who would ensure that both acted in ways that were good for the nation.¹⁶⁵ The "Square Deal" encapsulated this self-conception. It said that here one had a President who would find the middle path, the proper balance between contending interests, the path of peace, prosperity and mutually beneficial cooperation. The tacit implication was that there was no necessary conflict between capital and labor, just a shortsightedness on the part of both factions that could be remedied by the right leadership. This was the key to Roosevelt's use of consensus as a lever to power. He told the nation what it desperately wanted to hear, that there was no fundamental conflict of interest between owners and workers, that corporate rapacity and labor violence did not raise questions about the tenability of capitalism or its protective consensus, but were rather superficial problems to be remedied with stern reminders, as one might scold a misbehaving child.

¹⁶⁴ American Political Tradition, p. 230.

¹⁶⁵ "Because he feared the great corporations as well as the organized workers and farmers, Roosevelt came to think of himself as representing a golden mean...This was the conception that he brought to the presidency. He stood above the contending classes, an impartial arbiter devoted to the national good, and a custodian of the stern virtues without which the United States could not play its destined role of mastery in the world theater." American Political Tradition, p. 221

The key to Roosevelt's power was psychological: "The frantic growth and rapid industrial expansion that filled America in his lifetime had heightened social tensions and left a legacy of bewilderment, anger, and fright, which had been suddenly precipitated by the depression of the nineties. His psychological function was to relieve these anxieties with a burst of hectic action and to discharge these fears by scolding authoritatively the demons that aroused them. Hardened and trained by a long fight with his own insecurity, he was the master therapist of the middle classes."¹⁶⁶ This passage anticipates the kind of psychological analysis Hofstadter will develop later in The Age of Reform. The meaning of Roosevelt's political ideas is not to be found in what he said, but in what his words did, in the way they gave catharsis or pacified fears. He did not dismiss Roosevelt as a mere pseudo-reformer. He saw him as a skilled technician of mass sentiment, who found a rhetoric that gave emotional satisfaction and thus avoided the need for actual change. Like a lightning rod, Roosevelt channeled the energies of reform to harmlessly dissipate them.

Hofstadter saw Roosevelt's longing for combat as a symptom of his emotional insecurity and as a manifestation of his desperate flight from any possible moment of detachment or repose. But war also served public function. Like his public scolding of the trusts, it was a distraction, a way to sell people on the idea of America as a shared, manly endeavor in which labor and capital had no essential conflict. War and empire thus functioned alongside empty anti-trust rhetoric to form a new, protective mantle for consensus. None of this implied that Roosevelt had sinister intentions, that he deliberately lied or feigned a love of war to better serve capital. He sincerely believed that war was the crucible in which a unified America would be forged. And if he told reformers what they wanted to hear, he did so because he thought he knew their interests better than they, and that to really give them what they wanted would do more harm

¹⁶⁶ American Political Tradition, p. 213.

than good. His mendacity was not malicious. But it did reflect the superficiality of his mind, his inability to grasp that neither war nor the kind of disinterested, patrician leadership that he believed he offered would resolve the tensions between the traditional American consensus and the destabilizing effects of industrial capitalism.

Hofstadter saw Woodrow Wilson as another conservative in reformer's clothes, but with a different brand of leadership than that offered by Bryan or Roosevelt. Bryan personified the working-class mind, and gave the average American the feeling that his problems and wishes were understood. Roosevelt offered a vigorous scolding of the forces that average Americans feared. Wilson's specialty was moral exhortation. He believed that there was no need to change the American consensus or the governing philosophy that it entailed. What the country needed was moral uplift, a change in the way individuals behaved in their economic life, a change of heart from selfish individualism to a greater sense of communal and national responsibility. His rhetoric would provide this moral transformation.

Wilson was the son of a preacher and he made his presidency a moral pulpit.¹⁶⁷ He accepted Roosevelt's idea of the president as a mediator between labor and capital, but unlike him believed that this mediation could be accomplished through rational persuasion, that if men could just be made to see that a more cooperative and generous way of life would benefit them, the conflicts of capitalism could be resolved. There was nothing wrong with the structure of America, no more than a car in working order is responsible for an accident. The blame lies with

¹⁶⁷ "Woodrow Wilson's father was a Presbyterian minister, his mother a Presbyterian minister's daughter, and the Calvinist spirit burned in them with a bright and imperishable flame. Their son learned to look upon life as the progressive fulfillment of God's will and to see man as a distinct moral agent in a universe of moral imperatives. When young Tommy Wilson sat in the pew and heard his father bring the Word to the people, he was watching the model upon which his career was to be fashioned." American Political Tradition, p. 238.

the driver, and Wilson believed he could talk people into driving more responsibly.¹⁶⁸ The effect of this was a curious kind of conservatism, a faith that the destabilizing forces that arose in the Gilded Age could be contained, if people could be made to think and behave more charitably. Where Madison assumed that selfishness was an inevitable political reality, Wilson thought it could be controlled by persuasion. To say that this hope was naïve would be understatement. The moral amelioration of capitalism Wilson hoped for never had a chance. But his belief that it did made his presidency another chapter in American conservatism. Convinced that no structural change was necessary, Wilson aimed only to restore the economic conditions of the past. In the end, he did not even accomplish that.

Hofstadter did not question the sincerity of Wilson's commitment, nor did he minimize Wilson's legislative achievements. But Wilson, like Roosevelt or Bryan, could not envision an America outside of its traditional consensus. In the campaign of 1912, Wilson railed against illicit business practices but never against free enterprise. He was all for big business, but with a remarkable deafness to self-contradiction, against any business practice that frustrated the ambitions of the rising, thrifty bourgeois.¹⁶⁹ He rebelled against consensus by abandoning strict *laissez-faire*, but only so far as was necessary to restore the meritocratic economic conditions which he believed *laissez-faire* had once created. One can see why Hofstadter subtitled this chapter "the Conservative as Liberal." Wilson was indeed a liberal in his willingness to embrace

¹⁶⁸ The solution to the problems of capitalism "must be found in a movement of moral regeneration, which would find its source in the hearts of the people and its arbiter in the government. Punishment must fall upon evil individuals—must be personal, not corporate. The corporation, he explained in one of his most frequently used metaphors, was an automobile; the maleficent corporation official was the irresponsible driver. It would be pointless to administer punishment to the machine; only innocent stockholders were penalized by fining corporations. The joyrider himself must be held responsible, and if he could not be exhorted into morality, then he must be bludgeoned." American Political Tradition, p. 250.

¹⁶⁹ "A big business that survives competition through intelligence, efficiency, and economies deserves to survive. But the trust is "an arrangement to get rid of competition"; it "buys efficiency out of business." "I am for big business," said Wilson, succumbing to the equivocation that invariably creeps into politicians' discussions of the trust problem, "and I am against the trusts." American Political Tradition, p. 256.

an interventionist state, but he did so only to conserve the middle class, entrepreneurial opportunities that big business had grown to threaten.¹⁷⁰

Hofstadter saw Wilson's failure to secure a lasting peace after World War I as a further example of his economic myopia. Hofstadter did not suggest that if America had ratified the League that World War II might have been avoided,¹⁷¹ but he did blame Wilson for creating a peace treaty that was indifferent to the economic causes of war, and thus inadequate to prevent those causes from generating a second conflict. Wilson naïvely hoped that an enlarged number of sovereign states, each with a high degree of democratic self-determination, would lessen national rivalry and lead to free trade, shared prosperity and peace. This, Hofstadter wryly observed, was "tempting the wrath of the gods." More democracy meant more intense national aspirations and thus more economic rivalry on a national scale, precisely the recipe that had led to World War I. Hofstadter said that the Fourteen Points "was not a struggle between an Old Order and a New Order, but merely a quarrel as to how the Old Order should settle its affairs. In this attempt to organize and regulate a failing system of competitive forces the theme of Wilson's domestic leadership was repeated on a world scale. Just as the New Freedom had been, under the idealistic form of a crusade for the rights and opportunities of the small man, an effort to restore the archaic conditions of nineteenth-century competition, so the treaty and the League Covenant were an attempt, in the language of democracy, peace, and self-

¹⁷⁰ "Wilson proposed that the force of the State be used to restore pristine American ideals, not to strike out sharply in a new direction...Walter Lippmann, then in his socialist phase, characterized the New Freedom as "the effort of small business men and farmers to use the government against the larger collective organization of industry." It had no sympathy, he complained, in harsh but essentially accurate language, "for the larger collective life upon which the world is entering." It was "a freedom for the little profiteer, but no freedom from the narrowness, the poor incentives, the limited vision of small competitors . . . from the chaos, the welter, the strategy of industrial war." American Political Tradition, p. 259-60.

¹⁷¹ "The ineffectuality of the UN as an agency of peace," writes Hofstadter, suggests that a ratified League would have fared no better. American Political Tradition, p. 280.

determination, to retain the competitive national state system of the nineteenth century without removing the admitted source of its rivalries and animosities.”¹⁷²

At the end of his term Wilson sat as a spectator at the inauguration of Warren G. Harding, “a man who was his very antithesis— a thoroughly native type, handsome, genial, kindly, ignorant, complacent, and weak, a model of normal mediocrity.”¹⁷³ Harding was chosen over his Democratic rival by an “unprecedented majority” and to some extent this was an allegory of the career of reform itself. Even if Wilson had embraced a more thorough conception of reform, and there is evidence in his correspondence that his thoughts did incline in this direction,¹⁷⁴ he was enough of a politician to know that the American people would not have stood for it, that he would have been branded a socialist and dismissed. Wilson, like Roosevelt, aided consensus by shaving off its rough edges and by connecting it to an idealized past, but he cannot bear too much blame for sustaining it. The limitations of Wilson’s reforms were politically inevitable. Consensus was the national creed, and no politician could reject it. Wilson’s fault was that he fell victim to the classic schoolmaster’s fallacy, an assumption that his words would move his listeners as much as they did himself, that his eloquence could change his pupils’ hearts and uplift their minds. He wanted to humanize capitalism and to give a more globalist perspective to foreign relations. What little success he achieved was in due time branded socialistic and foreign, and with Harding, the national mood swerved back to its customary form.

¹⁷² American Political Tradition, p. 277.

¹⁷³ American Political Tradition, p. 282.

¹⁷⁴ Wilson said, “The world is going to change radically, and I am satisfied that governments will have to do many things which are now left to individuals and corporations. I am satisfied for instance that the government will have to take over all the great natural resources ... all the water power, all the coal mines, all the oil fields, etc. They will have to be government-owned. If I should say that outside, people would call me a socialist, but I am not a socialist. And it is because I am not a socialist that I believe these things. I think the only way we can prevent communism is by some such action as that.” American Political Tradition, p. 278.

Lenin, like Engels, argued for the necessity of proletarian revolution and a dictatorship of the proletariat.¹⁷⁵ He believed that bourgeois liberalism would always sustain itself through a pattern of accommodation, granting just enough resources and concessions to divide the working class and blunt the revolutionary impulse. Workers were all too willing to accept these crumbs of accommodation. Trade unionism, for example, slightly enlarged the workers' share of resources but did not dispute the right of capital to own the means of production.¹⁷⁶ Lenin's conclusion was that only revolution could create socialism because a combination of strategic accommodation and ideological weakness on the part of the working class would always frustrate the achievement of socialism within a democratic process.

Hofstadter developed Lenin's logic of revolution in an American context. He saw the capitalist consensus as a religious faith, impervious to anything but cosmetic revision. Consensus was a repository of deeply held values, connected to an idealized past and to dreams of future opportunity and prosperity. Like Yahweh to the ancient Israelites, infidelity to the covenant brought on divine wrath. To whatever extent *laissez-faire* failed, it was evidence of insufficient loyalty to the creed, never a refutation of the principle itself. And hence reform was always conceived as the restoration of *laissez-faire* in its pure form. Hofstadter's portrait of the American tradition echoed Gramsci's vision of the United States as the apotheosis of the bourgeois state, a nation whose people are so wedded to capitalist values that they deny the

¹⁷⁵ "A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon—authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois?" Engels, Friedrich. On Authority.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm>

¹⁷⁶ Lenin writes, "to turn aside from socialist ideology in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie." Lenin, Vladimir. What is to be Done? Moscow: Red Star Publishers, 1952, p. 17.

very existence of social class, and thus see no need for it as an organizing principle in politics. The American worker, with few exceptions, cooperated enthusiastically in his own exploitation. Politicians did not need to manipulate people to get them to support bourgeois values. Rather, they needed to parrot those values to have any hope of political success.

Hofstadter's chapters on Wendell Phillips and John C. Calhoun completed his argument. Both stood outside the capitalist consensus, and while it would be overblown to say that this gave them some epistemically privileged viewpoint, as outsiders they had the political freedom to critique consensus in a way that no ordinary politician could. In Calhoun, said Hofstadter, one finds "a rough parallel to several ideas that were later elaborated and refined by Marx: the idea of pervasive exploitation and class struggle in history; a labor theory of value and of a surplus appropriated by the capitalists; the concentration of capital under capitalistic production; the fall of working-class conditions to the level of subsistence; the growing revolt of the laboring class against the capitalists; the prediction of social revolution."¹⁷⁷ Phillips, too, arrived at Marxist conclusions: "Karl Marx, looking upon slavery as a socialist, had said that white labor could never be free while black labor was in bondage. Phillips, approaching socialism as an abolitionist, was arriving at the conclusion that black labor could never be truly free until all labor was released from wage slavery."¹⁷⁸ Hofstadter seemed to find it ironic that these two men, so distant from one another on questions of human rights and racial equality, both found their way to a radical, Marxist critique of capitalism.

But neither was a counterexample to the claim that consensus was hegemonic. Each stood outside consensus only because of his unique political circumstances. Calhoun's goal was to solidify the South against a hostile North, to ensure that poor, non-slaveholding whites would

¹⁷⁷ The American Political Tradition, p. 82.

¹⁷⁸ The American Political Tradition, p. 159.

remain politically loyal to the planters, not an easy task given the obvious fact that slave labor undercut white wages. He courted the loyalty of poor whites by saying that they could only be free from drudgery if there were permanent, black, “mudsill” class. To whatever degree Calhoun rejected consensus, and that rejection is far from complete, since his whole purpose was to secure the wealth of privileged slave owners, he could do so only because of the politics of slavery. He attacked free-labor capitalism to preserve the oligarchic privilege of a slave holding minority. His example did not show that a successful politician could eschew consensus, only that a unique set of political circumstances where a species of property is threatened can create a climate in which a critique of consensus becomes politically possible. In all but these rare circumstances, it was not.

Phillips, too, was an exception that proved the rule. He could critique capitalism because he was not a politician. He never held office and had no need to defer to public opinion. As an abolitionist, he was a despised and marginalized figure, at least until the war made it convenient to give him a wider hearing. As a labor organizer, he was heard with some amusement, but rarely taken seriously. Phillips, to extend the metaphor in Hofstadter’s introduction, was an irritant that the American clam safely insulated in nacre. There was no need to stop him from having his say because practically nobody wanted to listen. His critique of consensus seems to have attracted Hofstadter’s interest because of the improbability of its existence and the wide degree of ridicule it earned. The uniqueness of Phillips’ voice, together with its lonely isolation, did not disprove the hegemony of consensus, but rather showed its overwhelming power.

These were the sorts of thoughts that led Marx and Lenin to the conclusion that only revolution could successfully oppose bourgeoisie liberalism. Since, like hypnotized sheep, the American worker endorsed the principles that justified his exploitation, one cannot expect any significant opposition to consensus through democracy. The Progressive historians, who

projected their own political fantasies onto the American tradition, finding in it a perennial class conflict that did not really exist, were hopelessly naïve in their faith that democracy could secure justice for the poor. How could it, when the task was not to culminate a class struggle that had been going on for centuries, but to win a war that had not even begun? Nor was this their only complacency. Democracy, as the chapter on William Jennings Bryan suggested, was less likely to be a path of enlightenment than of regression. More power to the masses meant more religious bigotry, anti-intellectualism, nativism and false nostalgia. It seemed to follow that the only recourse was something like Bolshevism, a dictatorship of the “enlightened” worker on behalf of the benighted majority.

But to Hofstadter this alternative was no more attractive than democracy. He found it ridiculous that the Left of his day made excuses for Soviet barbarities. He knew of Stalin’s gulags and purges, Soviet atrocities in Spain, and found it hard to forgive their complicity with Hitler before the war. He also knew that the dictatorship of the proletariat offered no place to a man like him, no room for dissent or iconoclasm. Art and thought flourished more under capitalism, where a leisure class provided an appreciative and supportive audience, than in a worker’s paradise, where the need to serve the revolution led to art that was crude and propagandistic. There had been a time in his life when personal and political circumstances had made communism appealing. Once he had thought that Soviet communism offered the only plausible opposition to fascism. He had been married to Felice Swados, a dedicated and militant communist, whose tireless work on behalf of New York’s poor earned his respect. Felice’s death, and the obvious fact that the Russian Left had created a hell even worse than that of American capitalism, put Hofstadter into what he called a time of “intellectual transition,” an odd choice of words since his departure from communism was not the beginning of some new ideological

affiliation. When his allegiance to communism faded, he had nowhere new to go. He remained intensely interested in politics, but would never again identify himself with a political cause.

Hofstadter hated capitalism, hated Bolshevism, and saw democracy as the rule of brutes and idiots. He was truly a man with no place to go.¹⁷⁹ Like a Henry Adams or a William James, he was knowing and cynical, lonely and isolated. And it is within this alienated, disillusioned viewpoint that the peculiar Marxism of this book must be understood. Marx and Gramsci had it right. Consensus is hegemonic. There is nothing in American history, no movement among its working people, to suggest any ideological opposition to capitalism. Where Hofstadter departed from Marx or Gramsci was in his inability to believe in a viable alternative. This may be the best we can hope for. Exploitation under capitalism might be preferable if the only other alternatives are democratic Populism or Bolshevism. Left or right, a politics can rise no higher than the people who espouse it. And that was the problem: Hofstadter had no faith in people and thus no hope that a political organization could create a better national life. That is why he could not be a communist, or a Progressive, or even an FDR liberal. Each of these believe in progress and in the potential of politics to make life better. Hofstadter, at least in this book, is writing from a darker place. He saw nothing in history, nothing in democracy, and certainly nothing among the communists to give him any reason for hope. This book has a knowing, confident, and at times dismissive air, but beneath it there is an undercurrent of despair. That may be because Hofstadter wrote it while watching Felice Swados die of cancer, or maybe because the thirties seemed to offer a long succession of proofs of human depravity. Whatever the reason, consensus and hegemony are not just variations on traditional Marxist themes. They express the

¹⁷⁹ In a letter written in 1939 to his brother in law, Hofstadter writes: "We are not the beneficiaries of capitalism, but we will not be the beneficiaries of the socialism of the 20th century—if any—any more than Rykov, Zinoviev and Bucharin were. We have probably been kidding ourselves on that score. We are the people with no place to go." Quoted in Collins, Robert. "The Originality Trap." Journal of American History, Vol. 76, No. 1 (1989), p. 164.

existential distance of an author looking in from the outside, seeing not only sameness within the American tradition,¹⁸⁰ but between that tradition and its ideological alternatives. All ideologies were alike in one basic respect. He could not believe in any of them.

¹⁸⁰ Reflecting on the meaning of the consensus thesis in his 1967 introduction, Hofstadter wrote: "It seemed to me that I had been looking at certain characters in American political history not only somewhat from the political left, but also from outside the tradition itself, and that from this external angle of vision the differences that seemed very sharp and decisive to those who dwelt altogether within it had begun to lose their distinctness." American Political Tradition, p. xxiii.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE AGE OF REFORM

In this chapter, I argue that Hofstadter's The Age of Reform accomplished two tasks. It continued the critique of the intellectual Left, no longer the old Left of the Progressive Historians, but the contemporary Left of the 1950's whom Hofstadter called "Modern Liberals" or "Liberal Intellectuals." This new Left, he said, had misread its own history, projecting its own fears and aspirations onto its reform era predecessors. Second, Hofstadter used The Age of Reform to demonstrate the techniques and possibilities of a new historical method. In it he aimed to show what a cultural political history could be. He broke with the norms of professional historians by using the analytical categories of the social sciences, and with these categories, wrote a unique history of the reform era. His goal was not to narrate the story of Populism and Progressivism, but to analyze the ideas and emotions of the reform era mind.

Few books have been more reviled by critics than The Age of Reform. Some said it was a projection of the author's fears of Nazism, a "history by analogy" in which he did not deal with the reform movements in their own context, but rather crammed them into the mold of Rightist authoritarian movements in Europe.¹⁸¹ Others said it was a work of propaganda, an attack on McCarthyism in which Hofstadter "delegitimated" a political movement that he disliked by associating it with undercurrents of racism, anti-Semitism and nativism in the reform tradition.¹⁸² Some denounced the book's focus on cultural issues, claiming that Hofstadter falsely denied the importance of the reformers' legitimate economic grievances and painted

¹⁸¹ Wiener, Jon. "Why Hofstadter Is Still Worth Reading but Not for the Reasons the Critics Have in Mind." The Nation, October 8, 2006.

¹⁸² White, Richard. "A Commemoration and a Historical Mediation." Journal of American History, Vol. 94, No. 4 (2008), p. 1079, p. 1075.

them as groundless whiners.¹⁸³ Others objected to the book's methodology, frankly wondering if it deserved to be called history at all.¹⁸⁴ They asked whether it was properly inductive, moving from facts to more general characterizations, or *a priori*, where the author began with a presumption that the reform movements suffered from a range of mental pathologies and then cherry-picked a small set of documentary sources to support his prejudices.¹⁸⁵ Some saw Hofstadter as hungry for the fame that comes to writers who pioneer new modes of analysis, and believed he was more eager to use these dubious innovations than to deal with the real character of the history of reform.¹⁸⁶ Others were more open to his new methods, but suspected that Hofstadter chose them not because they offered a new way of looking at the reform movements, but rather because he needed a subject, any subject, upon which he could practice with his new intellectual toys.¹⁸⁷ Together these criticisms suggest that The Age of Reform is either a very bad book or one that has been thoroughly misunderstood. In either case they raise the question: What was Hofstadter trying to accomplish here and why did he believe his methods were suited to his task?

In his introduction, Hofstadter said he aimed to correct to the misperceptions of "Modern Liberals" or "Liberal Intellectuals," to dispel their comforting illusions about their reform-era antecedents. Liberal intellectuals "remake the image of popular rebellion closer to their heart's desire. They choose to ignore not only the elements of illiberalism that seem frequently to be an indissoluble part of popular movements, but also the very complexity of the historical process

¹⁸³ Pollack, Norman. "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of the Age of Reform." Journal of Southern History, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1960), p.495.

¹⁸⁴ Williams, W.A. "The Age of Re-Forming History." The Nation, January 21st, 1956.

¹⁸⁵ Potter, David. "The Politics of Status." New Leader, June 24, 1963.

¹⁸⁶ Collins, Robert. "The Originality Trap." Journal of American History, Vol. 76, No. 1 (1989), p. 164.

¹⁸⁷ Brinkley, Alan. "Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform: A Reconsideration." Reviews in American History, vol. 13, no. 3, 1985.

itself.”¹⁸⁸ Hofstadter wanted to shake the modern Left free of its flattering and simplistic delusions about its past. This was not just about forcing it to smell something malodorous. Hofstadter believed that the culture of the reform movements was obscured by the Left’s tendency to dragoon them into the role of long-suffering farmer or worker, ground under the boot heel of capitalist oppression. That picture did not capture the ways the reformers conceptualized their own political activity. Hofstadter did not deny the importance of structural issues—party politics, the growth of institutions, the exercise of political power—he just thought that this part of the story had been told and that it was time to look at the reformers from a new direction: “My theme is the ideas of the participants, their conception of what was wrong, the changes they sought, and the techniques that they thought desirable... The conception the participants had of their own work and the place it would occupy in the larger stream of our history.”¹⁸⁹ Caricatures, Hofstadter said, come just as easily from admirers as from enemies. What intellectuals of the modern Left needed was a measure of detachment about the reformers, which depended on their finding degree of detachment towards themselves. If they could set aside the needs with which they turned to the past, their wish to find in it exemplars of their own heroic aspirations, then they could start to see the reformers in the ways that the reformers imagined themselves.

This study of the political culture of the reform period is a logically necessary next step to the argument of Hofstadter’s first two books. In Social Darwinism, he portrayed an America with a predatory, competitive, entrepreneurial ethos that cut across class lines. Every social group was eager to use Darwinism to legitimate its particular form of predation. The American Political Tradition generalized the idea of an entrepreneurial ethos shared by rich and poor—the

¹⁸⁸ Age of Reform, p. 19.

¹⁸⁹ Age of Reform, p. 6.

American consensus—proving that even the great reforming presidents (Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson) never challenged the traditional *laissez-faire* assumptions of bourgeois capitalism. Together these two books argued for the necessity of a new kind of American history. If neither the career of Darwinism nor the larger trajectory of American politics agreed with the Progressive Historians' vision of the "the people" vs. "the interests," then one needed a different kind of story, one that was less economic and more cultural, less focused on class and more on the contests that occurred within the boundaries of shared economic assumptions.

The Age of Reform was Hofstadter's attempt to fill that space, to cease the work of intellectual patricide that so dominated his first two books and to show what a cultural history of politics could be. Other eras would have worked as subjects for this new sort of history. Later he will offer a psycho-social analysis of the New Right (The Paranoid Style) and still later a "social portrait" of colonial America (America at 1750). But there was a logic to his choice of the reform period for this, his first demonstration of the new method. Intuitively, the reform period was the most glaring counterexample to the consensus thesis, a time when it seemed—to the modern liberal—almost axiomatic that politics was about economics and that the contenders were divided along lines of class.

Hofstadter's first task was to show, as he did in somewhat more casually in The American Political Tradition, that the reform movements stood firmly within the American economic consensus. The stereotype of the reformers, due in no small part to the work of Progressive historians like Charles Beard, was that they were warriors against the plutocracy.¹⁹⁰ But

¹⁹⁰ See the chapter "Towards a Social Democracy" in Beard's Rise of American Civilization: "The general cast of thought and political practice in the United States corresponded for a long time to the requirements of the substantial owners of industrial property, who ruled the country with the aid of the more fortunate farmers" (p. 539). But, "before the lapse of a generation it was so battered and undermined at the base that the men of the age which had constructed it imagined, perhaps with undue fright, that the solid earth was crumbling beneath their feet" (p. 543). Beard, Charles and Mary. The Rise of American Civilization. New York: Macmillan Co., 1927.

Hofstadter shows that the reformers were not economic radicals and were not motivated by the Modern Liberal's worries about material inequality. Beard was correct that the reformers stood up to the depredations of the wealthy. But he failed to see that in most respects, the reformers were economically conservative in thought and deed, and that even their opposition to the plutocrats was not about levelling, but rather an effort to preserve the values of bourgeois liberalism which they believed to be threatened by the new forms of business organization that emerged in the late 19th century.

The Modern Liberal saw Populism through a romantic haze, finding in it a revolt against capitalism and a struggle to retain the simplicity and independence of life that had been threatened by plutocratic forces like railroads, banks, and federal monetary policy. To Hofstadter, the Modern Liberal had uncritically accepted the Populists' own propaganda, echoing their absurd nostalgia for the golden age of the independent farmer while ignoring the fact that these farmers were, and had always been, entrepreneurial capitalists, producing for international markets, mobile, and always engaged in land speculation. Populist discontent was not a matter of workers vs. owners much less a war on capitalism, but rather a fight for better opportunities within the capitalist system: "Populism can be best understood not as a product of the frontier inheritance but as another episode in the well-established tradition of American entrepreneurial radicalism... It was an effort on the part of a few segments of capitalistic agriculture to restore profits in the face of much exploitation and under unfavorable market and price conditions."¹⁹¹

Hofstadter believed that the "modern liberal's indulgent view of the farmer's revolt had been derived from the "soft" side of the farmer's existence, that is, from agrarian 'radicalism' and agrarian ideology," but it ignored the "hard" side of Populism, its commitment to capitalism and

¹⁹¹ Age of Reform, p. 59.

success within the entrepreneurial system.¹⁹² Modern Liberals had misapplied Frederick J. Turner's frontier thesis to the agrarian revolt. According to them the Populists were reacting to the closure of the frontier, fighting for the individualistic way of life that their ancestors had enjoyed, and if they called upon the government to take a more active role, it was only to preserve their Jacksonian equalitarianism. According to this myth, a simple, egalitarian agricultural order was destroyed by the rise of capitalism, and we should mourn them as capitalism's earliest victims, just as we should admire their heroic struggle against economic domination.¹⁹³ One cannot put the blame for this myth solely on the Modern Liberal's romantic imagination, for in some ways this was Populism's story about itself. They were the men who fed the nation, upon whom the cities were dependent if not outright parasitic. Farming was an inherently ennobling way of life, close to God and the Land. They were the pillars of American democracy, the men who had won the Revolution and shown the superiority of the yeoman farmer to the corrupt and greedy British empire. And now they were being pushed into poverty by a conspiracy of greedy men.

There was a tension between this soft, mythic¹⁹⁴ side of Populism and the hard commercialism of their actual lives. By the beginning of the Civil War, the independent yeoman who was supposed to populate Jefferson's Empire of Liberty "had almost disappeared before the relentless advance of commercial agriculture."¹⁹⁵ Their agriculture was mechanized, making the horse-drawn plow more of a quaint symbol than a reflection of actual production methods.

¹⁹² Age of Reform, p. 47

¹⁹³ Marx's work was peppered with a similar nostalgia for the "pre-capitalist" Middle Ages. Hofstadter does not say so, but perhaps the modern liberal, nourished on a diet of this Marxist myth, was all too ready to see a similar dynamic at play in Populism.

¹⁹⁴ "Myth" is a key concept for Hofstadter, denoting not an idea that is false but "rather one that so effectively embodies men's values that it profoundly influences their way of perceiving reality and hence their behavior. In this sense myths may have varying degrees of fiction or reality." Age of Reform, p. 24.

¹⁹⁵ Age of Reform, p. 38.

They did not farm just to feed themselves, but were raising and selling cash crops for the international market. Above all, they were land speculators, constantly investing in more land than they could properly farm with an eye towards resale. Hofstadter notes all this to show that the modern liberal image of the farmer as pre-capitalist is mistaken. But he does not say that the agricultural myth was just a delusion. In fact, the American farmer was pulled by contradictory ideals. There was the “soft” Jeffersonian agricultural romanticism, and then there was the “hard” Jacksonian bootstrapping myth of the self-made man, rising in wealth through successful entrepreneurship.¹⁹⁶ Hofstadter did not say the latter myth represented the true value system of the Populists while the former was just propaganda. Rather, and this is what the Modern Liberal fails to consider, the Populist was genuinely torn between value systems that did not cohere. It was as much a mistake to see the farmer as a victim of capitalism as it would be to see him as a capitalist with no reservations.

This was Hofstadter’s new historical method in action. He was trying to show that inside the Populist mind there were contradictions and delusions, tensions between one identity that was steeped in romantic nostalgia and another that reflected commercial reality. The problem with the modern liberal’s take on Populism was its simplicity. It pressed out all the contradictory aspects of the Populists’ ideological life. Hofstadter wanted to show that life in all its complexity, not just its conflicted self-conceptions but the myths the Populists created to explain their problems. The true pathos of Populism, for Hofstadter, was that they faced problems they did not understand and to which they had no solutions. They made use of the resources of explanation they had, peopling their imaginary universe with the archetypes of their stories, the noble farmer, the Vaudeville villain, and the crucified Christ. The result was an odd synthesis of Protestant Christianity, Victorian melodrama and frontier fable. Beard was correct that a

¹⁹⁶ Age of Reform, p. 40.

rhetoric of class conflict was prominent in Populist writings—the Money Power, they thought, was the principal enemy of good farming folk—but he failed to see that just underneath this tissue of self-serving delusion was a thoroughly capitalist reality. The Populists were agricultural businessmen who followed the traditional American path to political radicalism. They were upset that their earnings were so poor and demanded that the state do something about it.

One sees the depth of Populist allegiance to capitalism, says Hofstadter, in their ready abandonment of the more socialist elements in their program such as the demand for government ownership of railroads. They tempered their socialism to form an alliance with the Free Silverites, whose funds were desperately needed but who had no interest in economic radicalism, and later did so again when they allied with W.J. Bryan and the Democrats in the election of 1896. The Populists “hungred for success, as major party leaders knew it, and this left them open to temptation. They could, without too much difficulty, be persuaded to give up a large part of their program if they felt this was the way to win.”¹⁹⁷ In the late 1880’s, when their distress was at its most acute, they were willing to accept any expedient that provided relief, even if it clashed with traditional tenets of *laissez-faire*. By 1896, farm prices were rising and with the return of prosperity, interest in socialism quickly waned. They changed what they farmed, moving from cash crops whose prices were highly volatile to stable, locally marketed products such as corn and hogs. And most importantly, they gave up some of their stubborn, suicidal individualism, forming organizations that could regulate production and maintain stable prices. To say, then, that “the eclipse of Populist reform represents the final and total defeat of agriculture is no more than the modern liberal’s obeisance to the pathos of agrarian rhetoric.”¹⁹⁸ If anything, the distress of the farmer was salutary. It forced changes in methods of production

¹⁹⁷ Age of Reform, p. 102.

¹⁹⁸ Age of Reform, p. 95. Hofstadter refers here to John D. Hicks’ The Populist Revolt, published 1931.

and organization that greatly increased the farmers' prosperity. And it shook them free, to some extent, of the delusions that were holding them back, the dream of a return to the golden age of the yeoman farmer, and the equalitarian individualism that had precluded cooperation. In a deft use of sources, Hofstadter looked at magazines that were marketed to the prosperous farmer in the twenties, noting ads for new cars and advice for women on how to best use their make-up.¹⁹⁹ He observed that the very word "labor," which the farmers had once applied to themselves, came to denote the men who worked on the farms, not the owners. This was hardly the tragic death of the yeoman farmer that the modern liberal depicts. It was a story in which the Populists' lukewarm socialism was never more than an *ad hoc* expedient, quickly abandoned once a modicum of material prosperity had returned.

Hofstadter thought that histories of the Progressives also tended to overstate their subjects' degree of economic radicalism. "Histories written during and shortly after the New Deal era... were pervaded by the assumption that the New Deal was both an analogue and a lineal descendent of the Populist-Progressive tradition, an assumption which is by no means totally false but which tends to direct our attention away from essential differences and hence seriously to distort the character of our history."²⁰⁰ If the New Deal represented a sense of collective social responsibility, a belief that government had the obligation to lessen inequalities in wealth while it provided for the old and impoverished,²⁰¹ then the Progressives, on Hofstadter's telling, were not its forbearers. They had little desire to help the poor and no sense of themselves as belonging to the same economic class as farmers or laborers. Theirs was not a

¹⁹⁹ Age of Reform, p. 128-9.

²⁰⁰ Age of Reform, p. 4.

²⁰¹ This is how the Modern Liberal, not Hofstadter, would characterize the New Deal. For Hofstadter, the New Deal was unconcerned with the abstractions of moral obligation. It aimed purely at the restoration of economic health. The idea that the New Deal aimed to reduce inequality and to fulfill communal obligations was another instance of the Modern Liberal projecting his concerns on to the past.

war on wealth or the wealthy, but on new forms of organization in business and labor that they saw as threats to America's traditional, equalitarian individualism. "While Progressivism would have been impossible without the impetus given by certain social grievances," Hofstadter writes, "it was not nearly so much the movement of any social class or coalition of classes against a particular class or group...as it was an effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine."²⁰² The great irony to the modern liberal caricature of Progressivism was that the movement was reactionary, an effort to return America to an earlier economic and political order. It did not embody the view that capitalism was inherently unjust and had to be regulated to make it more equitable. It aimed to restrain new forces—the corporation, the labor union, the urban political machine—that had introduced elements of unfairness into what they thought would otherwise be a fair system. Progressives were staunch adherents to the American consensus, and modern liberals who read them as radicals had ignored the movement's fundamentally conservative character.

Hofstadter said the Progressives were essentially evolved Mugwumps. They were small town or urban, middle-class, overwhelmingly Protestant, and educated.²⁰³ They were not farmers or laborers or union leaders, but rather small businessmen, doctors, lawyers, clergy, councilmen, and mayors. They were from old families who had long enjoyed positions of respect and leadership, but who felt that their status was eroding, that "they were being overshadowed and edged aside in the making of basic political and economic decisions...by the agents of the new corporations, the corruptors of legislatures, the buyers of franchises, the allies of the political

²⁰² Age of Reform, p. 5.

²⁰³ Age of Reform, p. 144.

bosses.”²⁰⁴ They had not become politicized because of material deprivation. They were comparatively well off in a time of general prosperity. But they were “victims of an upheaval in status that took place in the United States during the closing decades of the 19th and the early years of the 20th century. Progressivism was to a very considerable extent led by men who suffered from the events of their time not through a shrinkage in their means but through the changed pattern in the distribution of deference and power.”²⁰⁵ The Progressives, in other words, were not fighting for an amelioration of capitalism but for the restoration of what they saw as their rightful place within it. The American garden had become choked with new weeds—trusts, plutocrats, unions, foreign agitators—and the Progressives were the gardeners who would expel these alien species. They saw “their” country slipping away and became politicized to take it back.

If the Progressives were class warriors, Hofstadter suggests, one would expect them to ally with the poor, particularly urban, immigrant factory workers. But there was no such alliance. In fact, the Progressives, though often urban, were distinctly rural in their outlook. “The native was horrified by the conditions under which the new Americans lived, their slums, their crowding, their unsanitary misery, their alien tongues and religion, and he was resentful of the use the local machines made of the immigrant vote.”²⁰⁶ Immigrants looked at politics as a way to gain some small bit of patronage, to sell their votes in exchange for resources and respect. To the Progressive, this was the antithesis of the principled disinterest that made American democracy work. Immigrants drank and seized whatever meager sensual pleasures they could. To the Progressive, this was the opposite of the self-mastery and restraint that were at the core of personal morality. The Progressive, then, had no sense of solidarity with the poor, but rather

²⁰⁴ Age of Reform, p. 137.

²⁰⁵ Age of Reform, p. 135.

²⁰⁶ Age of Reform, p. 175.

looked upon them with antagonism and contempt. If the Progressive worked to ban alcohol, regulate morals, and hobble the urban political machine, he worked not to help the downtrodden, but to tread them down a bit further. His efforts at civic reform were always strongly tainted with nativism.²⁰⁷ He was “insulated from the support of the most exploited sector of the population, and this was one of the factors that, for all his humanitarianism, courage and vision, reduced the social range and radical drive of his program.”²⁰⁸

Open a newspaper of the period and one finds ads for entrepreneurial opportunities right alongside the scathing journalism of the muckrakers. Readers saw no contradiction here. They were loyal to the ethos of bootstrapping and it was partly because of this allegiance that they despised plutocratic greed. The more the trusts rigged the game, they thought, the less scope there would be for individuals to rise. They feared this trend would end in social catastrophe. Hope was what separated the American worker from the discontented proletariat of Europe, a belief that with hard work he could climb the social ladder. Take away that opportunity and you take the source of the worker’s acceptance of the system, and create the menacing socialist or anarchist element that made democratic governance in Europe so rare.²⁰⁹ The Progressives were no socialists. They were willing to accept some degree of state economic intervention because they did not want socialism or other forms of labor radicalism to gain strength. They believed that the rapacity of the trusts, if left unchecked, would radicalize workers and it was to prevent this that they were willing to accept minimal limitations on *laissez-faire*.

Some of Hofstadter’s critics say that the evolved Mugwumps he saw as typical Progressives were not representative.²¹⁰ Other segments of Progressivism were not middle class and did not

²⁰⁷ Age of Reform, p. 177.

²⁰⁸ Age of Reform, p. 184.

²⁰⁹ Age of Reform, p. 222.

²¹⁰ Thelen, David P. “Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism.” Journal of American History, vol. 56, 1969.

share the Mugwump's economic conservatism. Hofstadter would surely agree. He never said that evolved Mugwumps were typical of all Progressives, only that they were the movement's politically decisive strand. Their education and employment in institutions of law, education and the church gave them opportunity to shape the message of Progressivism. They did not represent the numerical majority but had importance beyond their numbers because it was their rhetoric that framed Progressivism's goals and rationale.

The importance of Mugwump rhetoric was evident in the prominent role it played in presidential oratory. Listen to Theodore Roosevelt, said Hofstadter, and one hears a pitch aimed squarely at middle class interests and deferential to middle class fears, particularly the fear of economic radicalism. One could say the Square Deal struck a balance point between the interests of the poor and the rich, and this was the way Roosevelt framed it, but one might also see it as a statement of allegiance to the interests of middle class voters who feared unions as well as trusts. If actions like the settlement of the anthracite strike and the Northern Securities case suggested that something was being done about the trusts, Roosevelt believed he had shown his impartiality in other situations like "the so-called Miller case, which gave to trade-unions a lesson that had been taught to corporations—that I favored them when they did right and was not in the least afraid of them when they did wrong."²¹¹ Writing about the anthracite strike, Roosevelt did not paint himself as class warrior but rather as the conservative Republican he was, who acted to stave off "mob violence, a potential general strike, and perhaps even socialistic action."²¹² It "ill accords with stereotypes of Progressive thinking," concluded Hofstadter, taking aim yet again at the Modern Liberal caricatures, "that 'Dollar Mark' Hanna and J.P. Morgan should have attended as midwives at the birth of the neutral state."

²¹¹ Hofstadter quotes Roosevelt, Age of Reform p. 233

²¹² Age of Reform, p. 234.

Woodrow Wilson was an equally clear voice of the Progressive distaste for economic radicalism. Wilson's rhetoric paints the corporations not as enemies of the poor, but of free enterprise. Wilson's "evocative speeches express the tendency of the middle-class public to think of the economic order not so much as a system organized for the production and distribution of goods as a system intended to reward certain traits of personal character... Success was a reward for energy, efficiency, frugality, perseverance, ambition and insight." The problem was that the new forms of economic organization had decoupled success from virtue. In the past America "had been committed to ideals of absolutely free opportunity, where no man was supposed to be under any limitations except the limits of his character," but in recent years, the "middle class is being more and more squeezed out by the processes which we have been taught to call the processes of prosperity." This was not true prosperity, Wilson said. "Anything that depresses, anything that makes the organization greater than the man, anything that blocks, discourages, dismays the humble man, is against all principles of progress."²¹³ Shrewdly tapping into America's instinctive fear of authority, Wilson portrayed the economic power of the trusts as a threat to personal liberty. "This is a second struggle for emancipation," he wrote. "If America is not to have free enterprise, then she can have no freedom of any sort." Wilson's indulgence in this hyperbole shows the depth of his commitment to an America of small entrepreneurs, and the vast distance between his views and his reputation as an early advocate of the New Deal state. "When one reflects," observes Hofstadter, "that this idea, that free enterprise is the cornerstone upon which all other freedoms rest, has become the rallying cry of conservatives in America and the supreme shibboleth of the National Association of Manufacturers, one realizes why so many men who were ardent Progressives before the first World War could have become equally ardent conservatives during the past twenty years

²¹³ Hofstadter quotes Wilson, Age of Reform, p. 224.

without any sense that they were being inconsistent.”²¹⁴ The appearance of inconsistency arises only when we misunderstand what the Progressives stood for. They reluctantly accepted state intervention as necessary to restore individual opportunity and the moral function of the economy. But if state intervention derailed that moral function by shielding the unfortunate from the harmful effects of their bad choices, as it seemed to do under the New Deal, then Progressives would despise the state just as much as they did the trusts, and for precisely the same reason.

Why does Hofstadter put so much emphasis on the economic conservatism of the Populists and the Progressives? In part because he wanted to stress the differences between the reform period and modern, post-WWII liberalism. The Keynesian paradigm that defined modern liberalism reflected a sense that the classical liberalism of *laissez-faire* had failed. The Great Depression had proven that, just as widely shared middle-class prosperity in the post war years had proven the legitimacy of the New Deal state. But that was not how Populists or Progressives thought. They had not lived through the Great Depression or the New Deal. They still believed in classical liberalism, in the culture of bootstrapping entrepreneurship and in the moral rectitude of inequality, even if those inequalities were vast. They did not see themselves as moving past an exhausted paradigm, but as restoring an America that needed to be saved from the consequences of its own economic progress. The very label of “Progressive” was a misnomer. They were more reactionary than revolutionary. “They did not intend to quietly resign themselves to the decline of this great tradition without at least one brave attempt to recapture that bright past in which there had been a future.”²¹⁵ Ignoring this difference, the Modern Liberal falls into anachronism. By stressing this difference, Hofstadter seeks to give the Modern

²¹⁴ Age of Reform, p. 226.

²¹⁵ Age of Reform, p. 225.

Liberal a dose of much-needed detachment; they were not like us, and the more of us we see in them, the less we see them for who they were. Hofstadter does not deny that the Progressives began some of the work that the New Deal continued, taming such “industrial barbarisms” as child labor or the lack of provision for injured or elderly workers. “The insistence that the power of law be brought to bear against such gratuitous suffering,” he wrote, “is among our finest inheritances from the Progressive period.”²¹⁶ He did not replace one simplification (they were just like us) with its equally simplistic antithesis (they were nothing like us). If he stressed their difference, it was because his contemporaries were so much worse at seeing these differences than at noting similarities. Like Narcissus, they were enamored with their own image, and saw that image reflected in the pool of the past. By disturbing these waters, Hofstadter tried to make Modern Liberals more conscious of the uniqueness of the reform tradition, and also more conscious of themselves.

In The Progressive Historians, Hofstadter said that a historian who is properly attuned to culture does not just look at the economic situation of a group or movement, but rather at how they conceptualized that situation, how it connected to their traditional modes of understanding, to their fears and hopes, to their memories of the past and their expectations for the future. This is what Hofstadter does in The Age of Reform. He does not distinguish the reformers from modern liberals just to chastise his contemporaries. He wanted to explain the uniqueness of reform culture, to get inside it and show how their thoughts and feelings flowed. All that he says about their economic conservatism serves as prologue to this, his main purpose.

Hofstadter believed that he could not reveal this inner mental world without using the analytic tools of modern psychology and sociology. Political milieu, as he understood it, included much that was not strictly rational: belief systems that were internally inconsistent, political acts

²¹⁶ Age of Reform, p. 240.

that were more symbolic than substantive, imaginary enemies and delusory hopes. It is hard to see how one could disagree with his basic premise. Human beings behave irrationally, especially in their political lives. Sociology and psychology provide paths to explain the irrational, and thus these disciplines are essential tools for revealing the etiology of political choice. One cannot, Hofstadter seems to say, write a history of what Wilson or Roosevelt did without reference to the national political mood within which their rhetoric took shape, and which directed and limited their exercise of power, but one cannot understand that mood without the social sciences. Thus, social science is not just a permissible addition to the historian's toolkit, but a necessary one.

Hofstadter's critics saw the matter differently. For them, there was something inherently pejorative about psychoanalyzing one's subjects. Psychology is something you use on crazy people, they seemed to believe, so by using psychology in his description of the reformers, Hofstadter was insulting them. This is the way Norman Pollack read him. For Pollack, The Age of Reform was a spiteful character assassination on the American liberal tradition, more reflective of the conservative sympathies of its author than the movements' true character. Norman Wiener read it similarly, but saw it as Leftist propaganda, not Rightist. For him, the argument of the book is one great fallacy of guilt by association: the Populists were bad, the McCarthyites and the New Right were just like the Populists, so the McCarthyites were bad, too. Neither of these authors made much effort to read Hofstadter sympathetically. But the questions they ask are worth answering. Does Hofstadter tell the story of reform, particularly of Populism, in a deliberately malicious way to disparage the liberal tradition? Or does he attack the reformers as a way of impugning the modern right, acting out the tired stereotype of the traumatized Jew finding Nazis under every rock?

Both Pollack and Wiener premise their interpretations on the assumption that Hofstadter is disparaging the Populists, even if they disagree on why he does so. But the text does not support this assumption. Correctly anticipating that he would be accused of finding Nazis where there were none, Hofstadter said that “Populism, for all its zany fringes, was not an unambiguous forerunner of modern authoritarian movements... Among those things which must be kept in mind when we think of the period between 1890 and 1917 is that it had about it an innocence and relaxation that cannot again be known, now that totalitarianism has emerged.”²¹⁷ One does not describe Nazis as “zany” nor are they often seen as a movement of “innocence and relaxation.” In writings on the Nazis, one invariably finds a grave solemnity, a tone of awestruck horror that is nothing like the authorial voice in this text. Hofstadter was clearly enjoying himself, and invited his readers to share in that enjoyment. He went on long walks through forgotten texts like Mary Lease’s The Problem of Civilization Solved, or Ignatius Donnelly’s Caesar’s Column, or Mrs. S.E.V. Emery’s Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People, smiling at their rustic simplicity and clearly enjoying a laugh at their expense, but not, to my ear, in a way that was derisive or mean. Hofstadter was a sophisticated New Yorker who acted a bit like a carnival barker hawking a freak show of ideological oddities. He did not dislike his subjects, although there was a bit of condescension in his tone. Even Populist anti-Semitism was treated with indulgence, as something more recreational than vicious or dangerous. “What I am trying to establish,” he wrote, “is not that the Populist and Progressive movements were foolish and destructive but only that they had, like so many things in life, an ambiguous character... Fifty sixty years ago our social system had

²¹⁷ Age of Reform, p. 21. He repeats the point at the end of his section on Populism: “If there seems to be in their (the Populists’) situation any suggestions of a forerunner or analogue of modern authoritarian movements, it should by no means be exaggerated. The age was more innocent and more fortunate than ours, and by comparison with the grimmer realities of the 20th century, many of the events of the Nineties take on a comic opera quality.” Age of Reform, p. 93.

hardly begun to be touched by the gentle hands of remorse or reform. Today...it has been altered and softened in countless ways. The place of the Progressive tradition in this achievement is so secure that it should be possible to indulge in some critical comments without seeming to impugn its entire value."²¹⁸ Hofstadter was right. It *should* be possible to discuss the ambiguous character of the reform movements without being thought to denigrate their entire value. But as Collins, Wiener and Pollack show, this attentiveness to ambiguity and complexity is usually misunderstood. In their bivalent cosmology, a historian has friends or enemies but nothing in between.

Ambiguity, Hofstadter suggested, was the only sensible response to the Populists' ideological world.²¹⁹ One felt sympathy for magnitude of their suffering, but also an irresistible temptation to scoff at the delusional and simplistic ways in which they understood the causes of their troubles. They were right that a new wave of industrial capitalists had come into power and that their own political power had diminished. They were the victims of price fixing by the railroads and a deflationary monetary policy that increased the cost of their debts. And they understood that the center of gravity in American culture had changed from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial, and that their status had fallen as a result. What they failed to grasp was that much of their suffering was the inevitable result of a maturing economy and that a great deal more of it was self-inflicted. They grew cash crops for the international market and speculated in land. They were often unprepared for fluctuations in prices because they were so deeply leveraged.

²¹⁸ Age of Reform, p. 18.

²¹⁹ "In the attempts of the Populists and Progressives to hold on to some of the values of agrarian life, to save personal entrepreneurship and individual opportunity and the character type they engendered, and to maintain a homogenous Yankee civilization, I have found much that was retrograde and delusive, a little that was vicious, and a good deal that was comic. To say this is not to say that these values were non-sensical or bad...To those who felt most deeply about them, their decline was a tragic experience that must be attended to with respect, even by those who can share it only through some effort of the imagination." Age of Reform, p. 12.

Their romantic attachment to the myth of Jacksonian individualism meant that there was little cooperation between farmers, so they produced more crops than the market could bear and then cut prices to sell the surplus, depressing their earnings even further. To all these causes they were blind. "Populist thought," wrote Hofstadter, "showed an unusually strong tendency to account for relatively impersonal events in highly personal terms... Populist thought often carries one into a world in which the simple virtues and unmitigated villainies of a rural melodrama have been projected on a national and even international scale. In Populist thought the farmer is not a speculating businessman victimized by the risk economy of which he is a part, but rather a wounded yeoman, preyed upon by those who are alien to the life of folkish virtue."²²⁰

Who were these aliens bent on destroying the folk? The Populists saw the world as a great dichotomy. You were either of the people or the interests, a member of the toiling multitude or an agent of the "money power." Once there had been a true democracy in the United States, they believed, but the money power had corrupted the political process and now the working class were exploited with impunity. The Populist platform of 1892 saw "a nation brought to the verge of moral, material and political ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot box and the legislature... The newspapers are muzzled or subsidized, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and land concentrated in the hands of the capitalists. Urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection, imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down."²²¹ Each of these complaints was legitimate. But the Populists believed that all these different institutions worked together as part of one, vast conspiracy to defraud the poor. The Populists did not just think that

²²⁰ Age of Reform, p. 73.

²²¹ Quoted by Hofstadter, Age of Reform, p. 67.

there had been conspiracies in history, but that history was “itself a conspiracy...a vast fabric of social explanation woven out of nothing but skeins of evil plots.”²²² The agents of conspiracy were not all Jews, but Jews had a prominent place in Populist demonology, no surprise since they saw money and banks as the main instrument of domination.²²³ There was, says Hofstadter, an element of anxiety and apocalyptic fear in Populist literature. The absence of any middle ground or space for compromise, the implacable and ruthless greed of the rich, and the impotence of democratic institutions, all made it seem that they were standing on the verge of a new form of slavery. Hofstadter went deeply into Ignatius Donnelly’s Caesar’s Column, “one of the most widely read books of the early nineties,” a dystopic novel in which the rich lived in luxury and enforced their rule with the help of bomb-dropping dirigibles. After “two tasteless love stories,” typical of the “kind of suppressed lasciviousness one often finds in popular writing of the period,” the story ends with a successful uprising of the poor, and a cathartic “round of bloodletting which may have been modeled on the French Revolutionary terror but makes the latter seem bloodless by comparison.”²²⁴

Why did Hofstadter go so deeply into the folklore of Populism? In his introduction he said that he wanted to reveal the reform movements by explaining “the conception the participants had of their own condition,” and the imaginative projections of the Populists form a part of that conception. But the key utility of this psycho-social analysis was that it illuminated political choice. Why, for example, would the Populists support war in 1898? What could they possibly have to gain from the “liberation” of Cuba? The Populists, Hofstadter said, did not just see the Money Power as an American problem. There was a larger, international conspiracy of which

²²² Age of Reform, p. 73.

²²³ Hofstadter notes that Populist anti-Semitism was “entirely verbal. It was a mode of expression, a rhetorical style, not a tactic or a program.” Age of Reform, p. 80.

²²⁴ Age of Reform, p. 69.

American banks were just a part. The evil heart of that conspiracy was England, and the Populists would have preferred to go to war with them. But the monarchical regimes of Europe were also conspirators—they, too, oppressed their workers and stifled democracy—so a blow struck against them would land, to at least some extent, on the Populists' own enemies. Like Marxists, the Populists believed that politics, particularly monarchies and empires but also so-called democracy in America, was nothing but the use of state force to aid in the enrichment of the few. Strike down a monarchy, therefore, and one diminishes the strength of the Money Power. The same factors that explained Populist enthusiasm for war led to their disdain for the empire that followed it; they saw the former as a crusade against the plutocrats, and the latter as an extension of plutocratic power.²²⁵

Support for war with Spain was a choice that flowed naturally from Populist demonology. They hated cities and foreigners, cities because the Money Power lived there, immigrants because they had no sense of democratic responsibility and sold their votes to the wealthy. The same people who were ardent Populists in the 90's were later equally ardent prohibitionists, nativists, and often Klansmen. One can only make sense of these choices, Hofstadter suggests, by understanding the imaginary constructions by which the Populists personalized the causes of their suffering. Go the route of the Progressive historians, by contrast, and try to understand these choices as expressions of rational self-interest, and none of them make sense. Nativism, for example, is no help to a farmer who does not compete in the urban labor pool and benefits substantially from low prices for manufactured goods. It seems, then, that Hofstadter gives us the catalog of Populist delusions to make larger point about politics, and a corresponding point about historical method. Political choice is not rational *per se*, but only in relation to one's ideological commitments. These commitments are creatures of myth and imagination, symbols

²²⁵ Age of Reform, p. 88-90.

and projections of what we fear and hate. Thus, a study of political choice must also be a study of ideological myth. Hofstadter never denied the reality of Populist suffering. He only observed that they were ordinary humans in the way they responded to this suffering, casting blame where it was not deserved, finding enemies where there were none, suspecting conspiracies that did not exist. They peopled an imaginary world with images drawn from the stories they had heard, from Christianity, from Victorian novels, and from the mutterings of professional agitators who resuscitated ancient hatreds against cities, Jews, banks, foreigners, and kings. The leading metaphor of Bryan's Cross of Gold speech was the apotheosis of these delusions. In their minds, they were not petty agricultural capitalists, upset because their entrepreneurial plans had not succeeded, but innocents like Jesus, betrayed by greedy men.

Hofstadter's treatment of the Progressives had none of the humor or fondness for ideological oddities one saw in his section on Populism. Populism's ideological exuberance was a product of the rustic simplicity of its creators. The Progressives were educated and serious, with no interest in melodrama, international conspiracies, or fantastic leaps of the imagination. And yet their world, too, was a construct of mutually supporting myths. This is not to say that their beliefs were delusions. Myths, for Hofstadter, are "ideas that embody men's values" and condition "their way of perceiving reality." The myths of the Populists were distant from ordinary standards of justification, but the myths of the Progressives were more reasonable, partaking, in Hofstadter's terms, in a greater "degree of reality." So why call them myths?

Several critics note that Hofstadter made use of Robert Merton's distinction between latent and manifest function. Unfortunately, none of these critics explain exactly where Hofstadter uses this distinction. I suggest that he uses it most clearly in his section on the Progressives. The ideas of the Progressives had a manifest purpose, to represent the state of affairs in their society, to form an accurate verbal picture of their world. They also had a latent purpose, to

fulfill the Progressive's emotional needs. Hofstadter read the work of Sigmund Freud and there is a distinctly Freudian feel to this section. One does not find Oedipal complexes or penis envy or any of the other caricatured ideas that comprise the popular view of Freud, but rather a biologized epistemology in which ideas have an emotional function that is independent of, and often supersedes their representational role. Human beings are not neutral mirrors of the world. Their ideas serve needs more powerful than the desire for truth, balance or accuracy. There is, moreover, a natural process of self-occlusion in the human mind, a blindness to the ways that ideas serve needs. It is easy for those outside an ideological community to see the confluence between its ideas and interests, but for those within that community, their politics has nothing to do with convenience. They see their ideas as justified by experience and held because they are true. This is not a pathology or abnormal state. It is simply what human beings do when they form political beliefs, just like they do when they form beliefs about relationships, responsibilities, or themselves.

Hofstadter played with this contrast throughout his chapters on the Progressives, asking not just what they thought, but what these thoughts did for them. He observed, for example, the ever present motif of realism in Progressive literature, seen in muckraking journalism, in naturalistic fiction that took its readers into the impolite worlds of "street scenes and abattoirs and fly-specked rural kitchens,"²²⁶ and in the work of "scientific" historians like Beard, who had the temerity to "muckrake the founding fathers and the Constitution itself."²²⁷ What was the "psychic function" of the "pervasively ugly character of reality that the Progressives so frequently harped on"?²²⁸ What explains their insatiable hunger for stories of slum life, of

²²⁶ Age of Reform, p. 197.

²²⁷ Age of Reform, p. 200.

²²⁸ Age of Reform, p. 210. "Psychic function," I believe, is Hofstadter's term for latent function.

prostitutes and bars, of jails and corrupt politicians, a hunger so widely shared that magazines like *The Cosmopolitan*, *Collier's*, and *McClure's* built their circulations upon it?

Part of the answer connected to Hofstadter's claim that the dominant voices of Progressivism were alienated professionals, men who were materially well off but felt that their status had declined. For these men, the more disordered the world was, the greater its need for them. A prosperous and well-organized nation had no need for Progressive direction. But a chaotic and decaying nation was one that needed the disinterested leadership of morally upright men. It was a world in which their new status as redeemers replaced the status they had lost as their professions evolved.

The clergy "had seen their churches losing the support of the working class on a large and ominous scale. Everywhere their judgment seemed to carry less weight... Even in their capacity as moral and intellectual leaders of the community the ministers now had to share a place with the scientists and the social scientists...University learning carried with it the fresh and growing authority of evolutionary science, while the ministers seemed to be preaching nothing but old creeds."²²⁹ There was, therefore, a clear logic to their decision to throw themselves into the causes of secular reform. The "vigorous interest in the social gospel, so clearly manifested by the clergy after 1890, was an attempt to restore through secular leadership some of the influence and authority and social prestige that clergymen had lost through the upheaval in the system of status and the secularization of society."²³⁰ Lawyers, too, had experienced professional decline, a "crisis of self-respect precipitated by the conflict between the image of legal practice inherited from an earlier age of independent professionalism and the realities of modern commercial practice."²³¹ Where once lawyers had been valued in proportion to their forensic skill and

²²⁹ Age of Reform, p. 151.

²³⁰ Age of Reform, p. 152.

²³¹ Age of Reform, p. 156.

erudition, now they were employed in corporations and hence subordinate to the plutocrats. “Thus internal conditions, as well as those outward events which any lawyer, as a citizen, could see, disposed a large portion of this politically decisive profession to understand the impulse towards change.”²³² Academics were a third example of this pattern. They had not experienced acute status decline like lawyers and priests—universities had grown tremendously and the status of the professor had risen—but Hofstadter says social groups that are rising can experience much the same tension as those that are falling. With more status, he suggests, professors felt emboldened to challenge the rich men who ran their university boards, and to defend their academic freedom by taking the schools who dismissed them to court. Their expectations had risen even faster than their professional esteem, and so they felt the same sense of diminishment in relative terms that the lawyers and priests had felt in absolute terms. For these academics, especially those in the social sciences, the excoriation of society was a growth industry. The greater the problems, the more need there was for academics like them in “the writing of laws and the staffing of administrative and regulative bodies.”²³³

None of these professionals, whether lawyers, professors or priests, if asked why they threw themselves into the causes of reform, would say that they wanted to increase their degree of importance and respect. They would say they saw social problems and because they were good men, took personal responsibility for solving them. Hofstadter agreed that their impulse to reform did rest in part on their perception of genuine social wrongs. But he questions why these men suddenly found themselves inclined to care. Why “had they become disposed to see things they had previously ignored and to agitate themselves about things that had previously left them unconcerned?”²³⁴ There was, he believed, a latent function behind the grim realities they

²³² Age of Reform, p. 161.

²³³ Age of Reform, p. 155.

²³⁴ Age of Reform, p. 149.

had come to see in their world. It was a world in which they were needed and important. Certainly, this thought was preconscious. One cannot admit to needing the very problems one sets out to solve. But Hofstadter suggests it is legitimate for a historian to posit the existence of this need, not just to explain the abrupt spike in Progressive enthusiasm for reform, but their oddly prurient fascination with vice. Like a censor who shows his taste for pornography by the fury with which he denounces it, the Progressive obsession with iniquity cannot be explained simply by pointing to the reality of social problems. The Progressives needed these problems, which they stared at so raptly in their novels and newspapers, to convince themselves that their lives had meaning, to have a battle to fight in which they could be heroes, not just vestiges of a vanished world.

Muckraking served a second latent function. It was a way to express and assuage Progressive guilt. "One is impressed," writes Hofstadter, "with the enormous amount of self-accusation among the Progressives...The Yankee ethos of personal responsibility had been transmuted into a sense of guilt... This is the real function of the pervasively ugly character of reality that the Progressives so frequently harped on. Pervasive though it was, it was neither impenetrable nor irremovable. It was an instrument of exhortation, not a clue to life but a fulcrum for reform."²³⁵ The Progressive mind was a distinctly Protestant mind, and Protestant worship was similar in form and function to muckraking. A Protestant finds grace by searching for sin, describing it, and condemning it. Guilt is not just an emotion, it is a confessional process, a thought exercise without which there can be no redemption. Muckraking had a similar structure. It began with the identification of social sins. Reveal these sins and good citizens would be moved to action and problems could be solved. This was part of the mania for transparency and uncovering that one finds in Progressive writings, including the work of the Progressive historians. They believed

²³⁵ Age of Reform, p. 206.

that most people were sufficiently good to be moved to action once they learned of egregious wrongs.

But there was another latent purpose in Progressive self-flagellation, distinct from its role as a fulcrum for reform. Progressives held themselves personally responsible for social problems and guilt was a way to punish themselves for these sins. Much like a family dog who has peed on the rug cannot rest easy until he is punished for his crime, the Progressive conscience needed to pay a price in pain for having let things go so wrong. Their neglect, they feared, was a product of their cupidity. They had reaped benefits from the exploitation of immigrant labor and from the impoverishment of the farmer. They were the middle class whose prosperity derived, to at least some extent, from wealth created by working class sweat. Had they lost their country because they were too busy counting their thirty pieces of silver? Hofstadter gives us a poem from the Progressive writer Florence Wilkerson: "They are dying that I may live, the tortured millions by the Ohio river, the Euphrates, the Rhone. They wring from the rocks my gold, the tortured millions. Sleepless all night, they mix my daily bread. With heavy feet they are trampling out my vintage, they go to a hungry grave that I may be fed."²³⁶ Part of what makes this poem so cringeworthy is our awareness that there is no will on the part of the author or her readers to alter the basic economic structure of exploitation. Feeling guilty about the system takes the place of changing it. "The middle-class citizen," Hofstadter said, "received quite earnestly the exhortations that charged him with personal responsibility for all kinds of social ills. It was his business to do something about them. Indeed, he must do something if he was ever to feel better. But what should he do? He was too substantial a fellow to want to make any basic changes in a society in which he was so typically a prosperous and respectable figure. What he needed, therefore, was a *feeling* that action was taking place, a sense that the moral tone of

²³⁶ Age of Reform, p. 209.

things was being improved and that he had a part in this improvement.”²³⁷ Muckraking, then, was paradoxically both a mechanism of reform and an impediment to reform. The guilt it created punished the well-meaning Progressive for his role in the system, and because he had paid in psychic pain for his prosperity, his conscience was satisfied without having to effect substantial change.

There was a similar dynamic in the Progressive response to business organization. Progressives were torn between contradictory impulses, to enjoy the lucrative jobs and low prices created by the aggregation of production into larger units, and to break up these aggregates so that the rising entrepreneur would be able to compete. “They were trying to keep the benefits of the emerging organization of life and yet to retain the scheme of individualistic values that this organization was destroying.”²³⁸ Unwilling to sacrifice either, the Progressive gravitated to symbolic satisfaction. Keep the corporations, but scold them. Let it be known that one stood for the little man, but do nothing to change the mechanisms that impoverish him. The Modern Liberal looks back on Roosevelt’s settlement of the anthracite strike in 1902, or at Wilson’s impassioned defense of the small businessman against the greed of the trusts, and sees substantial acts which measurably advanced working-class interests. Hofstadter takes a different view. For him these were symbolic acts which changed little but gave the Progressives what they needed, the feeling that something was being done. Roosevelt was gratified when the Supreme Court upheld his actions in the Northern Securities case in 1904, “and he had every right to be, not because he had struck a blow at business consolidation, for the decree was ineffective and consolidation went on apace, but because for the first time in the history of the presidency, he had done something to ease the public mind.”²³⁹ Anti-trust prosecution, says Hofstadter, had no

²³⁷ Age of Reform, p. 210.

²³⁸ Age of Reform, p. 215.

²³⁹ Age of Reform, p. 237.

appreciable effect on preventing or restraining trusts. But that was never its real purpose. Its function was to assuage public fear and its success in this task is part of what allowed the agglomeration of big business to continue. “In one of his more inscrutable sentences, Wilson said ‘I am for big business, and I am against the trusts.’”²⁴⁰ Hofstadter does not try to make rational sense of this patent contradiction. He rather notes that it was only by contradiction that Wilson’s rhetoric could achieve its dual purpose, to peddle the Horatio Alger narrative of hope to a frustrated middle class while preserving the business organization that he saw as responsible for American prosperity. Torn between their fears and their attraction to big business, Roosevelt and Wilson were typical Progressives in their affection for symbolic acts which reconciled the irreconcilable. “While the Progressive citizen was alarmed at the threat to economic competition and political democracy, he was also respectful of order, aware of prosperity, and cautious about launching any drastic attack on propertied institutions...When a social problem is, in its largest aspects, insoluble, as this one was, and when the feelings aroused over it are as urgent as the feelings of the Progressive generation, what usually happens is that men are driven to find a purely ceremonial solution.”²⁴¹

There are clear Freudian echoes here. Impermissible desires, said Freud, find an outlet in dreams or fantasy. Human beings seek in their imagination the satisfaction that they cannot get from reality. Hofstadter is not denigrating the Progressives by suggesting that their rhetoric, and a good deal of their legislation, had the same masturbatory quality. The Progressives, he says, should not be “a temptation to the satirical intelligence,” nor should we “fall too readily into that easy condescension one may feel when speaking about the problems of an earlier age.” If they had recourse to symbolic satisfactions when confronting a problem that was both

²⁴⁰ Age of Reform, p. 248.

²⁴¹ Age of Reform, p. 243.

immensely painful and unsolvable, this shows their humanity, not some mental or moral deficiency. What seeing them this way should accomplish, however, is a slight deflation of the heroic aspect with which they are often remembered.

A similar deflationary quality—and another permutation on the contrast between manifest and latent function—appeared in Hofstadter’s discussion of the Progressive literature on cities. Here, too, one saw Hofstadter introduce ambiguity into one of the Progressive’s signature achievements, urban reform. Cities, in the words of one reformer, were “a despotism of the alien, by the alien, for the alien, with occasional insurrections of decent folk.”²⁴² For Wisconsin Progressive Edward A. Ross, cities were “disastrous for native American workers. Immigrants were strikebreakers and scabs who lowered wage levels and reduced living standards to their pig-sty mode of life, just as they brought social standards down to their brawls and animal pleasures. They were unhygienic and alcoholic, they raised the rate of illiteracy and insanity, they fostered crime and bad morals, they lowered the tone of politics by introducing ethnic considerations and of journalism by providing readership for the poorest newspapers, the yellow journals... They bred in such numbers that they were increasingly dominant over native stock and thus threatened to overwhelm American blood and bastardize American civilization.”²⁴³ Ross’ overtly hostile nativism was somewhat extreme, Hofstadter said. More typical of Progressive writings was a mood reminiscent of white man’s burden, a strenuous effort to overcome their natural feelings of revulsion so that they might help those in need.²⁴⁴ Whether in the form of contempt or condescension, Progressives agreed that cities were in disarray and that immigrant communities were a major source of the chaos. Well-intentioned or hostile, the cause of urban reform was inseparable from nativism.

²⁴² Age of Reform, p. 177.

²⁴³ This is Hofstadter’s gloss on the work of Wisconsin Progressive Edward A. Ross. Age of Reform, p. 179.

²⁴⁴ Age of Reform, p. 180.

Urban political reform was particularly rich in this nativism of well-meaning condescension. The Modern Liberal looked back on urban political reform as one of Progressivism's great achievements. But Hofstadter said this, too, had an ambiguous character. Greater accountability and transparency might seem an obvious improvement, but that was not how immigrants saw it. For them a system of patronage gave them many advantages and patronage could only flourish in the absence of transparency. Machine politics and other institutions of urban life—saloons, dance halls, parochial schools—struck the Progressives as problems to be rectified, but for the immigrant, they were precious remainders of his own culture or mechanisms of relief from a life of squalor and grueling labor. Hofstadter painted a sympathetic portrait of the urban political machine. The machine boss, "with his pragmatic talent and his immediate favors, quickly appealed to the immigrant, but the reformer was a mystery. Often he stood for things that were altogether bizarre, like women's rights and Sunday laws, or downright insulting, like temperance. His abstractions had no appeal within the immigrant experience."²⁴⁵ The boss gave the immigrant a degree of respect that the Progressive could not. He attended weddings and christenings and funerals. He doled out favors and jobs. He courted the good will of the immigrant by generosity and attention, while the Progressive took the inherently disrespectful stance that immigrant ways were wrong and needed to be properly Americanized. In short, there was no separating Progressive urban political reform from cultural bigotry. Modern Liberals who look back on Progressives as kindred spirits prefer to forget the Progressive rejection of pluralism, but Hofstadter insists on its importance, not to denigrate the Progressives but to show that nativism was intrinsic to their conception of reform. It was another aspect of the status politics that characterized the reform period. For the native born American Protestant, immigrant communities were a challenge to their political and cultural supremacy.

²⁴⁵ Age of Reform, p. 183.

Reforming the cities thus had a manifest purpose, a well-intentioned effort to improve urban life, and latent, unacknowledged function, the assertion of native cultural and political hegemony.

Hofstadter's brief concluding chapter on the New Deal is unlike his sections on Populism and Progressivism. Here one finds no attempt to go behind the rhetoric, no search for the motives and meanings that lay behind the words, no cultural portrait of a political milieu. His goal in this section was limited, to illuminate the reform era by contrast to the New Deal. But making this contrast also supports the claim he made in his introduction, that historians who see a clear line of succession from the reform era to the New Deal were failing to appreciate the unique character of reform culture and projecting their modern sensibilities and presumptions onto the past. The New Deal, to put his point simply, was not a part of the age of reform. "Granting that absolute discontinuities do not occur in history, what seems outstanding about the New Deal is the drastic new departure that it marks in the history of American reformism. The New Deal was different from anything that had yet happened in the United States: different because its central problem was unlike the problems of Progressivism, different in its ideas and its spirit and in its technique."²⁴⁶

In Hofstadter's narrative, the New Deal did not kill the spirit of reform. That had died long ago during Wilson's presidency, in large part due to his handling of WWI. "Participation in the war," writes Hofstadter, "put an end to the Progressive movement. And yet the wartime frenzy of idealism and self-sacrifice marked the apotheosis as well as the liquidation of the Progressive spirit."²⁴⁷ Wilson's Fourteen Points had been a perfect expression of this Progressive spirit: the United States, if it sufficiently "mastered itself," could lead the peace negotiations with no

²⁴⁶ Age of Reform, p. 302.

²⁴⁷ Age of Reform, p. 273.

national ambitions and no selfish goals, creating policies which would prevent future wars by fostering the right kind of morals, tempering the nationalism and trade protectionism that had led to conflict. This was Progressivism internationalized, exporting the reforming spirit onto a European stage. It was also far more than the American public was willing to accept. Wilson's "effort to give the idealism of America an internationalist form reckoned without the fact that his country was not, even in the remotest sense, a country with an internationalist outlook. The traditional idea had not been that the United States was to lead, rescue or redeem Europe, but that it was to take its own people in a totally different direction which Europe was presumably incapable of following."²⁴⁸ Americans had grown weary of the giving up their savings for war bonds and their food for famine relief. They had accepted the necessity of wartime economic regulation by the War Industries Board, but now that the war was over they wanted the state to give up these controls. Less regulation, less self-sacrifice, less interest in the world, and less belief that moral reform was the business of the state: all were signs that the Progressive tide had begun to ebb. "The war purged the pent up guilts, shattered the ethos of responsibility that had permeated the rhetoric of more than a decade. It convinced people that they had paid a price for the comforts of modern life, that they had finally answered to the full the Progressive demand for sacrifice and self-control and altruism...The pressure for civic reform was followed by widespread apathy, the sense of responsibility by neglect, the call for sacrifice by hedonism."²⁴⁹

So it was no surprise that when The Great Depression put an end to the good times of the Twenties, the nation sought solutions that were distant from the spirit of reform. Self-sacrifice, moral exhortation, the war on organization in labor and business, muckraking, the demonization

²⁴⁸ Age of Reform, p. 278.

²⁴⁹ Age of Reform, p. 280.

of the plutocracy, the veneration of the rising small entrepreneur: all these passions had faded, to be replaced by a simple pragmatic goal, to restore the economy to its proper function, not the moral function of the reformers, but the mundane task of providing people with jobs and purchasing power. The reformers had fought for political reform and for a more direct democracy. They had fought against machine politics and party bosses. FDR reflected the mood of the thirties when he “made no effort to put an end to bossism and corruption. He simply ignored the whole problem.”²⁵⁰ The reform generation had been deeply troubled by the trustification of America. But “by 1933 the American public had lived with the great corporation for so long that it was felt to be domesticated, and there was far more concern with getting business life on such a footing as would enable it to provide jobs than there was with breaking up the larger units.”²⁵¹

One might say that the New Deal era was free of myth. The embodiment of passions and needs in political ideas had been replaced by an unemotional pragmatism, a sense that the management of the state and the economy was now a technical problem to be handled by experts, with no more moral import than fixing a faulty carburetor or a broken axle. “In discussing Progressivism,” says Hofstadter, “I emphasized its traffic in moral absolutes, its exalted moral tone... The New Deal showed a strong and candid awareness that what was happening was not so much a moral reformation as economic experimentation.” The New Deal had no accompanying ideology. It was a “sharp and sustained attack on ideologies, rational principles, and moralism in politics... a theory that attacks theories.”²⁵² Hofstadter did not put his point this way, but one might say that the New Deal was a moment of amoral pragmatism, bookended by two moralistic periods, each with its own, unique character. The modern liberal’s

²⁵⁰ Age of Reform, p. 308.

²⁵¹ Age of Reform, p. 310.

²⁵² Age of Reform, p. 315, 317.

concerns with justice, equity, and communal responsibilities belong to the second moral paradigm, distinct from both the neutral experimentalism of the New Deal and the moralism of the Progressives, which adhered to the traditional American consensus and saw the economy as a way to instill the bootstrapping virtues. Ironically, for a historian who is often accused of collapsing historical differences into a catch-all category like consensus, The Age of Reform was all about differences. There was no one Left. There was Populism, Progressivism, the New Deal, and a modern sensibility, each of which had its own unique character. To understand the history of the Left in Hofstadter's way is to see it not as a single, evolving tradition, but as a sequence of starkly different political milieus. It is this specificity of character that Hofstadter found lacking in the Left's conception of its past, and even if one rejects the characterizations Hofstadter offered, his larger point still stands: if the modern Left wants to grasp the character of phenomena like McCarthyism and the New Right, which are in many ways evolutions of the Populist and Progressive spirit, then it must do a better job of understanding itself, and be more willing to see the differences that distinguish it from the New Deal and the reform era.

My aim in this chapter has been to show how The Age of Reform accomplished two interlinked goals. It continued Hofstadter's critique of the left by attacking its sacred cows. No, he said, there is no single ideological tradition connecting the New Deal and the reform era. And no, the reformers are not the plaster saints one might find in an appraisal by a Modern Liberal, but rather have a complex and ambiguous character, full of myth and delusion, nostalgia and stubbornness, moral stridency and a blindness towards their own prejudices and presumptions. They were, in other words, merely human, and by showing their ambiguous character, Hofstadter did not aim to disparage them but only to reveal their normality. There was an intrinsic connection between this goal and his second task, which was to model a wholly new historical methodology. If one wanted to illuminate "the conception the participants had of their

own work and the place it would occupy in the larger stream of our history,” one must look at their rhetoric in all its complex functionality, probing not just what they said but what their words did, how these words symbolized the emotions, feelings and perceptions that conditioned their political activity and gave their milieu its unique character. To find this full range of meaning, Hofstadter turned to the social sciences, particularly the machinery of latent and manifest function he adapted from Freud. The Age of Reform thus completes the architectonic begun in Social Darwinism and continued through The American Political Tradition. In those first two books, Hofstadter challenged the dualisms of Progressive historiography. Here, in The Age of Reform, he showed how to transcend those dualisms, creating a model of historical inquiry that would forever change how historians thought about the past.

But was it history? When David Potter asked whether The Age of Reform was inductive, in effect he was asking how to classify this text. Was it history, or social criticism or some other personal and essayistic genre? Did it conform to the professional standards that distinguish history from other ways of writing about the past? One reason for the reluctance of historians to probe into what Hofstadter calls myth, the vast world of hidden emotions, meanings and motives that lay behind the surface grammar of political rhetoric, is a fear that once one departs from the purely empirical, there are no safeguards against the descent into propaganda and the political misuse of the past, and equally no barrier to the projection of the writer’s own prejudices and suspicions. Historical writing is the product of an academic, institutional setting and must conform to rules that exist to prevent these abuses. Since Hofstadter moves so fearlessly into the mental world behind the reformers’ words, it seems one must conclude, as W.A. Williams did, that The Age of Reform is not history.

Perhaps the better question is not whether The Age of Reform conformed to professional standards, since it is abundantly clear that it did not, but rather why Hofstadter chose to see

those standards as impediments. There is a necessary tension between the desire of historians to plumb the full depths of a historical agent's experience, and the limitations on evidence and inference that make those depths professionally taboo. Confronted with that tension, I suspect Hofstadter chose the violation of professional standards as the lesser of two evils. Conforming to those standards would have precluded the analysis of myth and motive that he saw as necessary components in the description of a political milieu. He is in some ways echoing Kant's criticism of the "crass empiricism" he found in Berkeley. If one treats the realm of the empirical as coterminous with reality, one ignores the factors that structure experience. A willingness to engage in transcendental deduction, to move from a historical agent's words to the hidden emotional realm that caused those words, is necessary if the meaning of those words is to be revealed. One might make the same point by reference to the practice of psychoanalysis. How effective would therapy be, if one took the patient's self-description as unquestionable, or if one refused to form conjectures about the motives or feelings that lay behind his words? Scruples about evidence protect history from abuse, but they also trap it on the level of superficiality. Hofstadter chose depth over discretion, a full picture of the historical agent's world over a picture he—and we—could be sure was correct.

This is why a measure of detachment was so important. The noble dream of the historical profession, to get closer to the truth through rigorous rules of evidence and inference, was not a dream he shared. For him, objectivity was not about getting closer to reality, but rather about getting farther from himself. It was about distancing himself from the cognitive failures that led historians into propaganda or self-projection. His long battle with the Left, both the Modern Liberal and the Progressive historians, was in some ways a battle with his own prejudices. He *was* a Modern Liberal who looked to Beard as his most important influence. His skepticism towards the historians of the Left was an outward sign of his inner, moral journey, a journey

that aimed at a place of neutrality and detachment from which he might be an unbiased mirror of the past. History, he seemed to say, does not need to chain itself within epistemic limits. A stultifying system of professional rules is not the only way to prevent history's abuse. Another way, his way, is to become a better historian by being a better human being, more able to set ego aside and look upon the past with a gaze uncluttered by desire.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

As America tries to understand itself in the age of Trump, Hofstadter can help. The Left responded to the election of 2016 with its usual hand-wringing and head scratching: how could working class America yet again vote against its own interests? How could the generous intentions of the Democratic party be spurned in favor of anemic offerings from the Right? Answers to these questions are complex, but Hofstadter might say that the Left has forgotten once again the enduring mythic power of the American consensus, just as it did in his day when it was shocked by Eisenhower's defeat of Adlai Stevenson. In the conclusion to The Age of Reform, Hofstadter reflected on the vast conceptual divide between Modern Liberals who accept the benignity of the New Deal without reservation and the many Americans who fear that it destroyed the values that made America great: "Much of America still longs for—indeed, expects to see again—a return of the older individualism and older isolation, and grows frantic when it finds that even our conservative leaders are unable to restore such conditions. In truth we may well sympathize with the Populists and with those who have shared their need to believe that somewhere in the American past there was a golden age whose life was far better than our own. But actually to live in that world, to enjoy its cherished promise and its imagined innocence, is no longer within our power."²⁵³

For all his intellectual failings, Trump seems to have grasped Hofstadter's point. Much of America cannot be seduced by the Left's material rewards because they think those rewards derail the moral function of the economy, hindering its capacity to reward the bootstrapping virtues and punish idleness and profligacy with poverty. The dream of a return to a better past is still fertile ground for a politician who promises to make that dream come true. Established,

²⁵³ Age of Reform, p. 326.

career politicians of the right do need to fear the discontent of their constituents. Their failure to recreate the golden age of individualism opens a path for a political outsider who says he can accomplish what they cannot.

There is no shortage these days of writers who insist, like Hofstadter, on the secondary importance of rational economic interests and remind their readers of the enduring power of America's traditional myths.²⁵⁴ Democratic leaders seem to be listening. Their platform for 2018, which they call "A Better Deal," replaces the divisive issues of identity politics with the classic message of American reform, that government must serve the interests of the rising entrepreneur. It must oppose monopoly and other forms of entrenched inequality so that the economy can reward virtue and punish vice.²⁵⁵

What would Hofstadter say about this new platform? He saw that the crusade against monopoly was already a "faded passion of reform" by the time of the New Deal. Will that same crusade be a formula for political unity in the 21st century, or just seem anachronistic and desperate? The Democratic party, for most Americans, is the party of the post-New Deal, Modern Liberal. Will its attempt to package itself as the defender of traditional consensus be taken as sincere or ridiculed as a transparent pander?

The historian H.W. Brands gave a Rightist version of the consensus thesis in a book called The Strange Death of American Liberalism. Brands saw an unbridgeable gulf between the Modern Liberal and adherents to America's traditional consensus. For a time, there was détente between the two camps because of the Cold War, but Vietnam killed that cooperative

²⁵⁴ See, for example: Zakaria, Fareed. "The Democrat's Problem is not the Economy, Stupid." Washington Post, June 29, 2017. Scarborough, Joe. "The Democrats Will Keep Losing Unless They Do This." Washington Post, June 22, 2017. DelReal, Jose and Clement, Scott. "Rural Divide." Washington Post, June 17, 2017. Rubin, Jennifer. "Trump Exploited the Cultural Divide, not Economic Unfairness." Washington Post, June 19, 2017.

²⁵⁵ Foran, Clare. "Democrats Bet on a Populist Message to Win Back Congress." The Atlantic, July 14, 2017.

arrangement, and now America is on its way back to being a nation of bootstrappers, where “government steps out of the road and lets people apply their personal energies to achieving their individual destinies in their own ways.”²⁵⁶ Brands is oblivious to the naturalistic fallacy in his argument—America has until recently been devoted to *laissez-faire*, so it should continue that devotion—but I believe he is right to point out the dependency of the post-war consensus on the unifying effects of the Cold War. An external enemy provided a framework of cooperation that America’s dying myths could not. Today, with no Cold War and an America deeply divided on the relevance of the old myths, there is little centripetal force to hold America’s segments together. Trump is sometimes blamed for trampling on the norms of decency that make American society work, but no less important is the damage he has done to its political myths, to the ideals of institutional forbearance and the proper separation of powers, to the integrity and trustworthiness of the press, and to the notion of an honorable opposition who must be treated with comity, in order to receive the same treatment on the inevitable day when they take charge. But Trump does not deserve all the blame. He is really just an opportunist, taking shrewd advantage of divisions he did not create. To some extent he showed the nation what many wished to ignore or deny, that America’s cultural divisions are so deep as to preclude even the most elementary forms of cooperation. There can be no solutions on issues such as infrastructure renewal, limiting health care costs, or dealing with climate change when both sides are so willing to practice politics in the paranoid style.

The paranoia of the current Right is so well documented that there is little to gain in rehashing it.²⁵⁷ The paranoia of the Left is less visible but no less toxic to political comity and

²⁵⁶ Brands, H.W. [The Strange Death of American Liberalism](#). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 159.

²⁵⁷See, for example: Ball, Molly. “Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear.” [The Atlantic](#), Sept. 2, 2016. Edsall, Thomas. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics is Back.” [New York Times](#), Sept. 8, 2016.

cooperation. As a Leftist whose enduring preoccupation was the shortcomings of those who shared his perspective, I suspect that Hofstadter would urge the Left not to project symbols of evil onto their opponents, as Modern Liberals do when they blame Trump or the Koch brothers or PAC's for political regression. The reality is much more mundane. The problem is not the power of wealth to manipulate voters, but the lasting mythic power of the *laissez-faire* tradition. As the quote from Brands shows, for at least half the nation, the American consensus means freedom, individuality, self-expression, and self-reliance, while the Modern Liberal stands for enforced conformity, a stifling political correctness, and a collectivism in which hard work is punished and laziness rewarded. The enemies of liberalism are not mustache-twirling villains counting their millions and plotting the exploitation of the masses. They are average, decent, well-meaning people, neighbors and coworkers, relatives and friends.

Like the Progressives, Modern Liberals do a poor job of seeing their own forms of illiberalism. It simply makes no sense to them when rural America complains that their traditional way of life is under siege and that the white, Christian, sexually unambiguous world they have always known is disappearing. To the Modern Liberal, it is axiomatic that a multiracial, sexually tolerant nation that practices distributive justice would be better for everybody. What they usually fail to see is that this well-meaning desire for progress is, in traditional American eyes, a form of cultural imperialism, and provokes the same resentments as Progressive attempts to improve the immigrant culture of the cities. Perhaps what Hofstadter would say to today's Left is the same thing he said to his own, modern liberal contemporaries. Find a measure of detachment. Put down the politics of paranoia. Take a moment from condemning the beam in your enemy's eye and look to the mote in your own.

And if they did, what then? I believe Hofstadter agreed with Jefferson, that the predatory culture of capitalism, the "half-lettered Hamiltonian system" which, once started, could not be

stopped, works so strongly against communal sentiments that it is something of a miracle that America ever had a working framework of cooperation. The dream of entrepreneurial success was a key ingredient of this social glue. As opportunity moves to Asia and other cheaper locales, as climate change and contracting populations lead to shrinking economies, what will take the place of entrepreneurial dreams as a new source of social cohesion? With no common racial or religious identity, and increasingly segmented sources of information that serve only to reinforce mutual detestation and suspicion, what is there to hold the American nation together? Trump is blamed for killing American democracy, but look at the situation with a measure of detachment, and one sees that he is just pumping bullets into a corpse.

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