

---

# The Conservatism of Richard Hofstadter

Ryan Coates  
Third Year Undergraduate,  
Durham University

*'We have all been taught to regard it as more or less "natural" for young dissenters to become conservatives as they grow older.'*

## Richard Hofstadter

So proved to be the case for the author of this statement, the outstanding American historian of the twentieth century, Richard Hofstadter (1916-70). This assertion challenges the dominant orthodox portrayal of Hofstadter as the iconic public intellectual of post-war American liberalism. The orthodox interpretation, supported by biographer David Brown and historians Arthur Schlesinger and Sean Wilentz, demonstrates Hofstadter's ideological progression from thirties radical, briefly a member of the Communist Party, to fifties liberal credited as the founder of consensus history.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation draws upon Hofstadter's most political works, including *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948), *The Age of Reform* (1955) and most prominently, the essays collected in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964), to reveal an apparent all-encompassing hostility toward conservatism. The revisionist interpretation, advanced by Hofstadter's fellow New York intellectual Alfred Kazin and historians Robert Collins, Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn, challenges this one-dimensional portrayal of Hofstadter's complex relationship to conservatism.<sup>2</sup> Rather than flourishing into the iconic historian of American liberalism, the revisionists contend, Hofstadter's intellectual development represented a gradual transition that had, by the end of his shortened life, culminated in a conversion to Burkean conservatism. Indeed, Kazin's description of Hofstadter as a 'secret conservative in a radical period' encourages parallels

---

1 David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 'Richard Hofstadter,' in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, eds. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 278-315. Sean Wilentz, foreword to Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (New York: Vintage, 2008), xi-xxx. See also Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985).

2 Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew*, (New York: Vintage, 1978). Robert M. Collins, 'The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism,' *Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 1, (1989), 150-167. Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn, 'Richard Hofstadter: The Ironies of an American Historian,' *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (1974), 1-23. See also Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

---

to be drawn with the founding father of conservatism, Edmund Burke.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Howe and Finn observed that 'As the years went by, a latent conservatism imbedded in his nature slowly came to the surface.'<sup>4</sup> This essay will seek to trace Hofstadter's ideological evolution from the neo-progressivism of early works such as *The American Political Tradition* to the 'latent conservatism' of *The Age of Reform*. Furthermore, it will clarify Hofstadter's distinction between moderate and pseudo-conservatism implicit in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, overcoming the commonly held assumption that Hofstadter was hostile to all forms of conservatism and allowing for the most comprehensive statement of the revisionist interpretation of Hofstadter to date.

Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1916, Hofstadter completed his doctorate at Columbia University in 1942, returned as assistant professor in 1946, was elevated to professor in 1952, and finally, in 1959, assumed the DeWitt Clinton Professorship of American History, a position he held until his premature passing in 1970. A perceptive critic of political culture, Hofstadter was blessed with the literary gifts of brevity, insight, irony and lucidity, which attracted a wide readership that extended far beyond the academy. Indeed, several of Hofstadter's books, including the iconoclastic *The American Political Tradition*, the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Age of Reform* and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) and the oft-quoted *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, remain in print. Although this style brought great success, Hofstadter's other literary traits – such as his penchant for caricature, exaggeration and overstatement – have meant that his interpretations of American history have been largely discredited. Likewise, Hofstadter's preference for interpretive paradigms over archival research was ill-suited to an increasingly professionalised historical guild. Hofstadter once described the historical reputation of the progressive historian Charles A. Beard as standing 'like an imposing ruin in the landscape of American historiography. What was once the grandest house in the province is now a ravaged survival.'<sup>5</sup> Much the same can be said for the consensus school of American history with which Hofstadter was controversially affiliated. Yet for all his interpretative analysis of American history may have been replaced, Hofstadter remains the dominant figure in American historiography.

Another of Hofstadter's distinctive traits was his tendency to apply psychological and sociological concepts to his historical analysis of American political culture. One such example was the distinction Hofstadter devised between pseudo-conservatism and what has been variously termed Burkean, classical, moderate, practical, traditional or true conservatism, which he made in a 1955 essay entitled 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt.'<sup>6</sup> Pseudo-conservatism, a term Hofstadter borrowed from Theodore Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), referred to an extreme, fundamental, militant and irrational attitude to political action, which imitated conservatism only in attempting to justify its actions.<sup>7</sup> 'It can most accurately be called pseudo-conservative,' Hofstadter explained, 'because its exponents, although they believe themselves to be conservatives and usually employ the rhetoric of conservatism, show signs of a serious and restless dissatisfaction with American life, traditions and institutions.'<sup>8</sup> Pseudo-conservatives, he noted, 'have little in common with

3 Kazin, *New York Jew*, 15.

4 Howe and Finn, 'Richard Hofstadter,' 20.

5 Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 344.

6 Richard Hofstadter, 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,' *American Scholar*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (1955), 9-27.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

8 Hofstadter, 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,' 10.

the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word, and they are far from pleased with the dominant practical conservatism of the moment as it is represented by the Eisenhower administration.'<sup>9</sup> Its followers subscribe to 'a form of political expression that combines a curious mixture of largely conservative with occasional radical notions,' which 'succeed in concealing from themselves impulsive tendencies that, if released in action, would be very far from conservative.'<sup>10</sup> Moderate conservatism in the vein of Burke placed the preservation of these traditions and institutions above all else and allowed their alteration only in the shape of gradual, incremental and organic reform, an approach Hofstadter himself would come to embrace. The pragmatic nature of Burkean conservatism clashed with the 'all-or-nothing' fundamentalism of pseudo-conservatives, who as Wilentz observed, 'wished to destroy far more than they did to conserve.'<sup>11</sup> Thus Hofstadter had carefully and successfully distinguished the pseudo-conservatism of McCarthyism as a distinct and unrelated entity from the moderate conservatism of Burke.

Overlooking this distinction and commanding almost universal acceptance, the orthodox interpretation depicts Hofstadter as one of the most important liberal public intellectuals of the twentieth century. Consequently, conservative columnist George F. Will labelled Hofstadter 'the iconic public intellectual of liberal condescension,' who 'dismissed conservatives as victims of character flaws and psychological disorders.'<sup>12</sup> This interpretation, it will be contended, is based upon a misreading of Hofstadter that excessively emphasises the essays collected in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, considering them to encompass a hostility to all variants of conservatism. This ignores the distinction between moderate and pseudo-conservatism made by Hofstadter and outlined above. Orthodox accounts are also routinely undermined by their implicit acknowledgement of the existence of moderate conservatism in Hofstadter's thought. David Brown, despite otherwise describing Hofstadter as a cosmopolitan liberal, sensed the presence of a 'latent conservatism' in later works, echoing the revisionist perspective of Howe and Finn.<sup>13</sup> Daniel Geary likewise detected conservative aspects of his thought and observed that 'even as Hofstadter became the iconic historian of post-war liberal consensus, he retained a more circumspect, complex, ambivalent, and sceptical outlook on American history and society.'<sup>14</sup> Thus even the most convinced proponents of the orthodox interpretation accept the existence of conservative elements in Hofstadter's thought. Similarly, Sean Wilentz unwittingly demonstrated the problem posed by overstating the orthodox interpretation. In the foreword to *The Paranoid Style*, Wilentz described Hofstadter as a 'restless, sceptical liberal intellect,' who 'refused to trade one dogma for another, but rather became a mordant critic and deflator of all dogmas.'<sup>15</sup> Far from providing supporting evidence of Hofstadter's liberal leanings, in emphasising Hofstadter's anti-dogmatic nature, Wilentz inadvertently undermined the orthodox interpretation and supported the revisionist assertion that Hofstadter had adopted a non-ideological conservative disposition.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, 11.

11 Wilentz, foreword to *The Paranoid Style*, xvii.

12 George F. Will, 'Candidate on a High Horse,' *Washington Post*, 15 April 2008, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/14/AR2008041402450.html>> Accessed 30 May, 2012.

13 Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 199.

14 Daniel Geary, 'Richard Hofstadter Reconsidered,' *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (2007), 430.

15 Wilentz, foreword to *The Paranoid Style*, xiii-xiv.

A distinct but related debate has been fought over whether Hofstadter belonged to the consensus history of the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>16</sup> *The American Political Tradition* was the closest of Hofstadter's works to advance the consensus interpretation of American history, which Schlesinger proclaimed, 'signals the appearance of a new talent of first rate ability in the writing of American history.'<sup>17</sup> The introduction, which served as the mission statement for the consensus school, pledged to emphasise the 'common climate of American opinion,' which had been 'obscured by the tendency to place political conflict in the foreground of history.'<sup>18</sup> This statement of intent was a blatant barb aimed in the direction of the progressive historians of the preceding generation, whose history had been characterised by Manichean conflict. For Charles A. Beard, this conflict was the class struggle between agrarianism and capitalism, whilst for Vernon Louis Parrington, it was the conflict between the ideologies of Hamiltonian conservatism and Jeffersonian liberalism. As John Higham observed of the progressive interpretation, 'a fundamental dualism cut through the course of American history.'<sup>19</sup> Consensus history contended that the progressive view overlooked the continuity and consistency that had characterised American history.

However, *The American Political Tradition* stood apart from other works of consensus history, such as Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949), Daniel Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) and Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955).<sup>20</sup> Whereas these works had emphasised the strength of the liberal tradition, Hofstadter contended that a predominantly conservative tradition had influenced American history. According to Hofstadter, the country had continually subscribed to the capitalist conservatism encapsulated in 'the ideology of self-help, free enterprise, competition, and beneficent cupidity.'<sup>21</sup> Though there had been fleeting episodes of deviation, 'the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man.'<sup>22</sup> Thus Hofstadter, having adopted this neo-Marxist perspective of American history, set out to tar the most prominent fabled American politicians with the brush of capitalist conservatism. The task produced a series of critical caricatures which ironically labelled the Founding Fathers as having symbolised 'An Age of Realism,' Thomas Jefferson as 'The Aristocrat as Democrat,' John Calhoun as 'The Marx of the Master Class,' Theodore Roosevelt as 'The Conservative as Progressive,' Woodrow Wilson as 'The Conservative as Liberal,' and Franklin Roosevelt as 'The Patrician as Opportunist.' The implication was that American politicians had espoused elements of conservatism in political practice by protecting capitalism. 'The business of politics – so the creed runs – is to protect this competitive world.'<sup>23</sup> Thus Hofstadter had not yet developed ideologically from the stance taken in his first book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (1944), which as Daniel Singal acknowledged,

16 Daniel Joseph Singal, 'Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography,' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4, (1984), 976-1004.

17 Schlesinger, 'The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It by Richard Hofstadter,' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, (1949), 613.

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

19 John Higham, 'Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic,' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, (1962), 611.

20 Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949). Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

21 Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, vii.

22 *Ibid.*, viii.

23 *Ibid.*, viii.

had 'afforded Hofstadter the chance to reconnoiter his enemy, the conservative ideology of individualism and *laissez-faire*.'<sup>24</sup> The Hofstadter of 1948 remained deeply hostile towards a Marxist-conceived, capitalist conservatism which he alleged had dominated American history.

Sometime between the publication of *The American Political Tradition* in 1948 and the publication of *The Age of Reform* in 1955, Hofstadter's 'latent conservatism' came to surface. Much as he had in *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter viewed large periods of American history as being dominated by conservatism. The opening sentence of the 1955 work asserted that 'the cycle of American history running from the Civil War to the 1890s can be thought of chiefly as a period of industrial and continental expansion and political conservatism.'<sup>25</sup> However, whereas in *The American Political Tradition*, Hofstadter had emphasised with hostility the strength of the conservative *political* tradition, in *The Age of Reform* he lamented the lack of any significant conservative *intellectual* tradition. 'Perhaps because in its politics the United States has been so reliably conservative a country during the greater part of its history,' Hofstadter mused, 'its main intellectual traditions have been, as a reaction, 'liberal,' as we say – that is, popular, democratic, progressive.'<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, 'For all our conservatism as a people, we have failed to develop a sound and supple tradition of candidly conservative thinking.'<sup>27</sup> Hence between 1890 and 1940, American political thought lent itself to the title *The Age of Reform*. Hofstadter criticised populism and progressivism, and adopted an 'ideological ambivalence' in questioning the merits of democratic reform. Schlesinger, one of the foremost exponents of the orthodox interpretation, conceded that this ideological ambiguity concerning democratic reform may have represented 'the flowering of the natural conservatism which Alfred Kazin detected thirty years ago.'<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Robert Collins concluded that 'it was this conservatism, rather than his earlier radicalism, that most directly contributed to his ambivalence in *The Age of Reform*.'<sup>29</sup> Hofstadter provided further evidence of his conversion to conservatism with his appreciative acknowledgement that 'what is of most value in conservatism is its feeling for the past and for nuances of thought, of administration, of method, of meaning.'<sup>30</sup> As Howe and Finn observed, 'In this sympathetic description of conservatism, Hofstadter could just as well have been describing some aspects of his own outlook.'<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, academic criticism of the book hailed mostly from the left, to which Hofstadter responded that they correctly interpreted *The Age of Reform* as conservative in its outlook.<sup>32</sup> Hofstadter had previously admitted that his disdain for populism 'springs not from that element in me that is more 'radical' than they were but from the latent conservative in me.'<sup>33</sup> The Hofstadter of 1955 had adopted a

24 Singal, 'Beyond Consensus,' 982.

25 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 3.

26 *Ibid.*, 12-13.

27 *Ibid.*, 13.

28 Schlesinger, 'Richard Hofstadter,' 313.

29 Collins, 'The Originality Trap,' 165.

30 Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 15.

31 Howe and Finn, 'Richard Hofstadter,' 20.

32 Norman Pollack, 'Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of "The Age of Reform"', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 26, No. 4, (1960), 478-500. Norman Pollack, 'The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism,' *American Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (1962), 76-80. Norman Pollack, 'Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism, and the Historian,' *Agricultural History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1965), 59-67. Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For a rather more moderate critique of *The Age of Reform*, see C. Vann Woodward, 'The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,' *American Scholar*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (1959), 55-72.

33 Hofstadter to Lee Benson, Dec. 1951, Box 1, Correspondence, Richard Hofstadter Papers (Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York).

non-ideological perspective which reflected a growing discomfort with democratic reform and the surfacing of this latent conservatism.

The writings most commonly utilised by orthodox interpretations of Hofstadter to emphasise an apparent hostility to conservatism are collected in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Upon closer inspection, these works reveal that Hofstadter was writing from an anti-dogmatic, non-ideological conservative position. As demonstrated, Hofstadter had in 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt' carefully distinguished pseudo-conservatism from practical conservatism. Similarly, in 'The Paranoid Style', perhaps Hofstadter's most famous essay, he recognised that whilst the paranoid style was indeed a pejorative phrase, it was not to be exclusively applied to the right. Hofstadter explained that though 'a common ingredient of fascism, and of frustrated nationalism', the paranoid style equally 'appeals to many who are hardly fascists and it can frequently be seen in the left-wing press.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Hofstadter criticised the 'ex-Communists who have moved rapidly ... from the paranoid left to the paranoid right, clinging all the while to the fundamentally Manichean psychology that underlies both.'<sup>35</sup> Thus Hofstadter viewed the paranoid style as typical of ideological extremities on the right, but also the left. The more visible right subsequently provoked Hofstadter's ire.

By 1964, it was the right that was ascendant. Hofstadter, now a conservative of moderate disposition, criticised presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater as leading the election campaign 'that broke the back of our post-war practical conservatism.'<sup>36</sup> When Goldwater defended the fundamentalist nature of his brand of pseudo-conservatism, declaring 'extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice' and that 'moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue', Hofstadter recoiled in horror. 'When, in all our history,' he wondered, 'has anyone with ideas so bizarre, so archaic, so self-confounding, so remote from the basic American consensus, ever gone so far?'<sup>37</sup> Once more, Hofstadter differentiated between the pseudo-conservatism of Goldwater and moderate conservatism, the former represented 'conservatism as a set of doctrines whose validity is to be established by polemics', the latter, with which Hofstadter sympathised, viewed 'conservatism as a set of rules whose validity is to be established by their usability in government.'<sup>38</sup> Hofstadter emphasised that this distinction 'is not a difference of nuance, but of fundamental substance.'<sup>39</sup> The ideological rigidity of Goldwater clashed with the very nature of American politics, which had always 'put a strong premium on the practical; rather than the ideological bent of mind.'<sup>40</sup> Thus the criticism of pseudo-conservatism and the paranoid style should be viewed as hailing from Hofstadter's moderate conservatism.

Hofstadter's Columbia University commencement address in 1968 represented the completion of his conversion to conservatism. Delivered amidst a period of significant student unrest, Hofstadter spoke warmly of the institution at which he had taught since 1946. He emphasised the need for order and stability within the university and recognised the fragile community it formed.

<sup>34</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Hofstadter, 'A Long View: Goldwater in History,' *New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1964, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 94-95.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Adopting an establishmentarian tone, Hofstadter observed 'Columbia has been a distinguished university these many years because it has been doing some things right.'<sup>41</sup> Rejecting student demands for university reform, Hofstadter channelled the spirit of Burke, warning: 'Plans for the future should be based upon an evolution from existing structures and arrangements, not upon a utopian scheme for a perfect university. The business of reforming a university takes time, requires a certain willingness to experiment and to retreat from experiment when it does not work, and indeed a willingness not to undertake too many interlocking experiments all at once.'<sup>42</sup> Hofstadter concluded the address with an appeal to the past: 'Columbia is a great and – in the way Americans must reckon time – an ancient university. In this immense, rich country, we have only a limited number of institutions of comparable quality.'<sup>43</sup> The radical student of the 1930s had become a member of the establishment by the 1960s. 'By the time he uttered this defence of his institutional home,' Howe and Finn concluded, 'the former radical was talking like a Burkean conservative.'<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Cremin described Hofstadter's association with Columbia in equally Burkean terms, as 'a kind of symbiosis of between man and institution, in which each drew strength from the other.'<sup>45</sup> The Hofstadter of 1968, having rejected radical reforms in favour of moderate institutional reform, had become a fully-fledged Burkean conservative.

Richard Hofstadter was a master of irony. Yet he had ironies of his own. Chief among them, and no doubt one that he would have appreciated, was that the iconic American liberal historian of the 1950s had, by the late 1960s, completed his conversion to conservatism. When Hofstadter was born in 1916, Woodrow Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes faced off for the presidency, with the forces of American liberalism and progressivism clearly in good health. When Hofstadter died in 1970, Richard Nixon occupied the Oval Office having defeated Hubert Humphrey and in the primaries, Ronald Reagan, foreshadowing the decline of American liberalism and the rise of American conservatism. Revisionist historians have subsequently tended to explain Hofstadter's conversion within the context of this wider political shift. Peter Steinfels claimed that Hofstadter's association with Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Lionel Trilling evidenced his conversion to neo-conservatism.<sup>46</sup> This attempt to contextualise Hofstadter's conversion is not endorsed here. The phrase 'latent conservatism,' used by Brown, Howe and Finn and Hofstadter himself, is revealing – it suggests that this innate conservatism had been eternally present, lurking beneath the surface, always with the potential to arise in the future. Hofstadter's conversion was isolated from the changing tide of American politics in that it was intrinsic and personal, although it affected his perspective on history and politics. No doubt there will be those, in this age of academic passivity and subtlety, who consider this revisionist interpretation of Hofstadter's thought to have been overstated. Such criticisms would have been in keeping with those levelled at Hofstadter himself, who in his waning years, declared that 'if a new or heterodox idea is worth anything at all it is worth a forceful overstatement.'<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Richard Hofstadter, 'The 214th Columbia University Commencement Address,' *American Scholar*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (1968), 588.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 589.

<sup>44</sup> Howe and Finn, 'Richard Hofstadter,' 17.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence A. Cremin, *Richard Hofstadter (1916-1970): A Biographical Memoir*, (Washington D. C.: National Academy of Education, 1972), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, 120.