



Review: Richard Hofstadter's the Age of Reform: A Reconsideration

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IN RETROSPECT

RICHARD HOFSTADTER'S *THE AGE OF REFORM*: A RECONSIDERATION

Alan Brinkley

Even its detractors (and there are many) might be inclined to agree that Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* is the most influential book ever published on the history of twentieth-century America. For more than a decade after its appearance in 1955, its interpretations shaped virtually every discussion of modern American reform. For longer than that, its methodological innovations helped recast the writing of history in many fields. Even those historians who have most vigorously and explicitly challenged its interpretations have usually been deeply, if at times unconsciously, in its debt. In this book, as in others, Hofstadter's signal achievement, the achievement that has most clearly marked him as one of the century's great American historians, lay less in creating durable interpretations than in raising new questions and establishing new modes of inquiry, in opening hitherto unperceived avenues of exploration. Robert Wiebe spoke for more than his own generation of scholars when he wrote in 1969: "To those of us who encountered *The Age of Reform* in graduate school, [Hofstadter] more than any other writer, framed the problems, explored the techniques, and established the model of literate inquiry that would condition our study of the American past."¹

The book's most direct influence, of course, has been on the study of populism and progressivism. A remarkable number of the many important studies of both phenomena that have appeared since 1955 were augured, directly or indirectly, by Hofstadter's observations. His discussion of "the struggle over organization," for example, laid much of the groundwork for the important Weberian interpretations of progressivism by Wiebe, Samuel Hays, and others. His examination of the links between political machines and corporate power, and his description of popular resentment of both, foreshadowed some of the significant work of David Thelen on popular reform movements in Wisconsin. His controversial description of the

Populist mind opened the way for a series of subsequent studies (many of them explicitly critical of Hofstadter, yet nevertheless indebted to him for both interpretive and methodological inspiration) examining Populist ideology – an aspect of populism all but ignored in the work of Beard or Hicks and their disciples.

For historians of modern America, *The Age of Reform* has served a role comparable perhaps only to that of C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South* in giving definition to a still undefined field. And yet unlike Woodward's monumental book, which remains the central work in modern southern history and whose interpretation many (if not most) scholars in the field continue to accept, *The Age of Reform* has begun in recent years to seem something of a relic. It is still widely read and widely cited. It continues to shape arguments and inspire debates. But it is now more often a target than an inspiration, a symbol of abandoned assumptions rather than a guide to further study. It has come, in short, to embody something of a scholarly paradox (to use one of Hofstadter's own favorite words): It is a book whose central interpretations few historians any longer accept, but one whose influence few historians can escape.

Woodward wrote *Origins of the New South* as part of a lifelong commitment to the field of southern history and after years of immersion in its sources. Hofstadter wrote *The Age of Reform*, by contrast, out of no longtime preoccupation with the subject (neither before nor after did he devote much attention to the Populists or Progressives) and after a strikingly thin acquaintance with the sources. It was not so much, then, a fascination with the reformers themselves that inspired Hofstadter to examine them, but rather the opportunity they gave him to test certain political, theoretical, and methodological concepts that by the 1950s had come to intrigue him. The self-consciously innovative tone of the study became its greatest strength; but its emphasis on innovation at the expense of evidence was also its most serious weakness.

Critics have most often cited the political concerns of intellectuals of the 1950s, and in particular their immersion in the highly charged atmosphere of the cold war, to explain the interpretations in *The Age of Reform*. Shaken by the memory of fascism and the reality of Stalinism, aghast at the success of Joseph McCarthy and other demagogues at home, deeply fearful of the intolerance and bigotry latent in unrestrained mass politics, intellectuals had committed themselves to the defense of what became known, in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s felicitous phrase, as "the vital center." The task of intellectuals, some believed, was the defense of the pluralistic assumptions of American democracy and the delegitimation of the dangerous ideologies that

challenged them from both the Left and the Right. In the hour of danger, all citizens were soldiers in the cause.²

As a member of the close-knit New York intellectual community, Hofstadter could not avoid absorbing, and indeed helping to formulate, many of these political concerns. "What started me off as an historian," he once said, "was a sense of engagement with contemporary problems. . . . I still write history out of my engagement with the present." Some of the ideas for *The Age of Reform* emerged from a celebrated 1954 conference at Columbia on the causes of McCarthyism (a conference that resulted in Daniel Bell's 1955 collection, *The New American Right*). And in the introduction to the book, Hofstadter admitted that he had focused his attention on "that side of Populism and Progressivism — particularly of Populism — which seems very strongly to foreshadow some aspects of the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time" (p. 20).³

But it would be a mistake to attribute too large a role to political commitments in shaping *The Age of Reform*, or to see it — as many critics have — simply as an attempt to read McCarthyism back into the politics of the late nineteenth century. For Hofstadter, these political concerns coexisted with, and were often secondary to, a series of important theoretical and methodological innovations. Even the 1954 Columbia conference, for all its political urgency, influenced many of its participants (and particularly Hofstadter) less by its political agenda than by its illumination of new interdisciplinary approaches to the study of human motivation.

By the early 1950s, Hofstadter had been unhappy for some time with the central assumptions of the "Progressive historians," most notably Charles Beard, in whose shadow he and his contemporaries continued to work. He considered simplistic and excessively rigid the Progressive view that all political alignments derive from the economic interests of contending groups; he questioned its assumption that American history as a whole could be viewed as a persistent conflict between the "people" and the "interests." Historians, he came to believe, must find a place in the scheme of things for ideas. And they must recognize that ideas did not (and here he was challenging, among others, Vernon Parrington) always reflect material concerns.⁴

In searching for new ways to deal with the role of ideas in politics, Hofstadter drew heavily on the social sciences. Like most twentieth-century intellectuals, he was deeply affected by Freud (and by contemporary scholars employing Freudian concepts); he made use as well of the work of the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, who had redefined the concept of ideology to permit consideration of noneconomic interests. More immediately, he drew from the work of some of his own colleagues at Columbia: from the literary critic Lionel Trilling, who taught him to appreciate the importance of

symbols in the human imagination (Hofstadter told friends that he had read everything Trilling had ever written); from C. Wright Mills, whose 1951 study *White Collar* defined the concept of "status" that would prove so crucial to *The Age of Reform*; and perhaps above all from Robert K. Merton, whose theory of the difference between "latent" and "manifest" functions furnished Hofstadter with a framework for incorporating the "irrational" into historical explanation. *The Age of Reform* became Hofstadter's first systematic effort to put these new approaches into practice.⁵

Hofstadter never claimed to offer a total picture of the reform movements he was examining: *The Age of Reform* was, rather, an effort to address an imbalance in historical understanding. Beard and his disciples had described populism and progressivism almost entirely in terms of clashing economic interests and had celebrated them as expressions of democracy and agents of social progress. Hofstadter did not deny the importance of economic factors, and he conceded that there was much of value in the reform tradition. But — and in this he made clear the central thrust of his argument — he pointed as well to an important strain of illusion and illiberalism in that tradition, which had made it sadly inadequate to the needs of a modern society. "I believe it will be clear," he wrote defensively in his introduction, "that what I am trying to establish 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" (p. 18). In time, however, as the ideas of the book traveled through the scholarly world, these careful qualifications ceased to be clear at all.

What primarily interested Hofstadter was what he considered a disjunction between the real and perceived interests of the men and women he was describing, a disjunction most clearly visible to him in the ideology of the Populists. American farmers, Hofstadter claimed, were by the late nineteenth century as much a part of the world of commerce and entrepreneurship as any other Americans. Yet they attempted to deny that reality and embraced instead an "agrarian myth," which encouraged them "to believe that they were not themselves an organic part of the whole order of business enterprise and speculation that flourished in the city . . . but rather the innocent pastoral victims of a conspiracy hatched in the distance" (p. 35). Populist politics, therefore, tended to express less the economic concerns of farmers than the essentially social and psychological anxieties that stemmed from the decline in their "rank in society." Instead of taking purposeful steps to adapt to the modern commercial world, of which they were already — economically — an integral part, they chose to rail defensively against it, taking refuge in a vision of an unrecapturable (and largely imagined) past.

Out of this tension between perception and reality emerged the central assumptions of Populist ideology: a dualistic view of social struggle, in which the great mass of the people stood pitted against powerful, selfish oligarchies; the "conspiracy theory of history," which attributed to these oligarchies an awesome and diabolical power; and a belief in the primacy of money, control of which had been the key to the ability of elites to subjugate the people, and control of which would be the key to a restoration of democracy. Out of that same tension came the characteristic features of Populist resentment: the preoccupation with scapegoats, the belief in ubiquitous plots, the apocalyptic vision of the future. Hence the semihysterical flailings at Wall Street, the Bank of England, cities, immigrants, and intellectuals. Hence the tinge of anti-Semitism that ran throughout the movement. ("It is not too much to say," Hofstadter wrote, "that the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States," although he was careful to add that such anti-Semitism was "entirely verbal," unaccompanied by any program of repression or violence) (pp. 61-62, 80).

Hofstadter's picture of the Populists found immediate favor among many social scientists; but within the historical profession, the interpretation was from the beginning the target of strenuous (and often vituperative) attacks. One of the first and most thoughtful critiques came in 1959 from Hofstadter's close friend C. Vann Woodward, in an influential essay, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual." Woodward did not single out *The Age of Reform* for criticism, but connected it with a much larger body of social science literature (among which Hofstadter's book, he claimed, stood out for its balance and sensitivity). Still, his reservations applied to *The Age of Reform* as clearly as they did to other works. The new view of populism was, he argued, fundamentally ahistorical — a deductive interpretation, based on contemporary concerns, that ignored the historical realities of the Populist insurgency, especially in the South. Other scholars made similar arguments: Walter T. K. Nugent, whose 1963 study, *The Tolerant Populists*, put Hofstadter's arguments to the test of evidence in Kansas and found little support for the allegations of nativism and xenophobia that were so central to *The Age of Reform*; Michael Rogin (a political scientist), whose 1967 book, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy*, challenged Hofstadter's implication that populism strongly foreshadowed McCarthyism.⁶

Meanwhile, other critics were offering more fundamental (and more explicitly ideological) critiques. Norman Pollack, who for a time made a virtual cottage industry out of his attacks on *The Age of Reform*, not only refuted Hofstadter's contention that the Populists were motivated by nostalgia, irrational fears, or prejudices. He also challenged the larger view of Populists as incipient capitalists working to reform but not fundamentally to alter the

economic system. In fact, he argued, the Populists were forward-looking radicals who wanted not only a "democratized industrial system" but "a transformation of social values." Their critique "went beyond economic conditions to embrace the question of the individual's plight, his dehumanization, his loss of autonomy in a society which rapidly reduced him to a dependent state."⁷

Pollack was the first of a substantial group of historians whose own experiences with the Left in the 1960s led to a new appreciation for the Populist past and a new search for an authentic American radicalism within it. Foremost among them was Lawrence Goodwyn, whose *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*, published in 1976, was the first full-scale study of the movement since John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt* of 1931. A veteran of the civil rights movement and an admirer of the New Left, Goodwyn portrayed populism as a coherent, enlightened, and fundamentally democratic movement (indeed much of his book was devoted to his exploration of the Populists' "movement culture"), struggling to produce a cooperative, localistic alternative to the competitive, centralizing tendencies of industrial capitalism. The distinctive expressions of populism were not fevered resentments or apocalyptic warnings, but the hopeful, constructive efforts of thousands of communities to build institutions and establish values that would permit an alternative economy (and alternative value system) to survive. The failure of populism marked the end of America's best (and perhaps last) chance to construct a democratic alternative to modern, oligarchic capitalism.⁸

The post-Hofstadter studies of populism were of varying quality. Pollack's, in particular, suffered from a polemicism and an unsystematic use of sources that robbed it of any lasting credibility. But whatever their limitations, most of these works were far better rooted in the evidence than *The Age of Reform*; and their cumulative effect was, if not to demolish, at least substantially to diminish the persuasiveness of its interpretation. Critics were not, however, challenging Hofstadter on the basis of evidence alone. They were objecting, at least implicitly, to his apparent animus toward the provincialism he perceived running through the movement, his disdain for what he contemptuously called the "village mind." And they were objecting as well to what they considered his normative view of economic progress, the assumption (which lay at the heart of *The Age of Reform* and, indeed, at the heart of most of the historiography of the 1950s) that industrialization, commercialization, and centralization were at once inevitable and, on the whole, desirable; and that agrarian protest was, therefore, a futile, flailing effort to stand in the way of progress. (It is significant, perhaps, that the two groups from Hofstadter's own, urban world that he chose to equate with the Popu-

lists were the widely reviled musicians and building trades unions of New York, organizations popularly perceived to be fighting to preserve obsolete crafts regardless of the costs to society.)

Hofstadter's critics viewed populism from a fundamentally different perspective. To them, modernization was a far less happy phenomenon, a process that had exploited and degraded significant segments of the population. Industrialization did not, in this view, evolve naturally from the commercial society of the early nineteenth century; it was a revolution, which cut off large groups of Americans from the economic and emotional moorings that had given meaning to their lives. For the rural men and women who became the source of Populist strength, this transformation was particularly traumatic — not only psychologically, but economically, for what was at stake was not simply the psychic rewards of "rank in society," but the social and economic viability of a distinctive way of life. Steven Hahn's recent study of the Georgia upcountry in the late nineteenth century, for example, portrays a white yeomanry trapped in the jaws of a new commercial system of which they had never been and could never be a part. For them, populism would be not only an expression of symbolic, psychic anxieties, but also of real material interests, albeit interests in many ways antithetical to the prevailing order.⁹

The new accounts of populism, as successful as they have been in challenging Hofstadter, have also created problems of their own; and the larger debate over the nature of the agrarian revolt remains to a great degree unresolved. For one thing, none of the major studies has given sufficient attention to the significant regional differences within the movement. Hicks and Hofstadter concentrated primarily on the Midwest, Goodwyn largely on the South, Hahn on two counties in Georgia; virtually all other studies have been similarly provincial in focus. Nor have they dealt adequately with the ambivalence with which farmers appear to have responded to the new market system: the fearful hostility toward the costs of the new market economy combined with the ambitious grasping for its benefits, the simultaneous traditionalism and modernism. (Hofstadter may, in fact, have recognized this ambivalence more clearly than many of his critics, even if he distorted his picture of it by exaggerating the importance of its purely nostalgic elements.) And as James Turner has argued, one vital question has received virtually no serious attention: Why, in an economy where virtually all farmers were suffering economic difficulties, did some people become Populists while others did not? Turner suggests (on the basis of an analysis of Populist strength in Texas) that geographical isolation may have been an important factor in determining Populist tendencies — both because such isolation placed additional economic strains on struggling farmers, and because it left them bereft of the sorts of

social and cultural reinforcements that might have helped reconcile them to the prevailing order. If Turner is correct, therefore, there may still be a place, even if a less central place than *The Age of Reform* suggests, for Hofstadter's emphasis on psychological anxieties, but less as the product of nostalgic mythologizing than as the result of objective conditions.¹⁰

Progressivism, Hofstadter argued, differed from populism in its location (primarily urban), its constituency (largely middle-class professionals), and much of its program. But Hofstadter did not share the view of more recent scholars that progressivism was an impulse fundamentally different from, indeed antithetical to, populism. Instead, he portrayed the two movements as part of the same broad current of reform. The Progressives, he argued, shared with the Populists a suspicion of modern forms of economic organization, a fear of concentrated power, and perhaps above all an attachment to a vanished and unrecapturable past. And thus like the Populists, they were—despite their many important accomplishments—unable in the end to deal realistically with the problems of their age.

Hofstadter conceded that progressivism "had the adherence of a heterogeneous public whose various segments responded to various needs." But there was, he argued, a core group of Progressives "upon whose contributions the movement was politically and intellectually as well as financially dependent, and whose members did much to formulate its ideals" (p. 135). These were men (he gave scant attention to women) of the "mugwump type," located mostly in the Northeast. They enjoyed moderate wealth and longtime social standing. And they considered themselves the natural leaders of society. In the years following the Civil War, such men had looked with contempt on the corrupt and seamy world of politics and had largely withdrawn from it. But by the turn of the century they had become sufficiently alarmed by the rise to power of urban bosses and newly rich industrial titans, and sufficiently distressed at what they considered their own responsibility for having allowed it to happen, that they began to reenter the political arena and to reestablish what they believed was their rightful place as its leaders.¹¹

On the surface, at least, progressivism was a phenomenon much better suited than populism to Hofstadter's mode of analysis. The Populists had mobilized in the face of genuine economic hardships; but the Progressives had operated in a climate of general prosperity, in which they themselves (as he identified them) were economically comfortable and secure. Thus the "paradox" that Hofstadter had seemed in some measure to invent for the Populists appeared real for the Progressives: the emergence of a popular reform movement unaccompanied by genuine economic grievances on the part of the reformers.

Hofstadter attempted to solve this paradox by introducing into historical studies the concept of "status," an idea he had extracted from recent work by C. Wright Mills, Seymour Martin Lipset, and other social scientists. This became, in the end, perhaps the most influential and certainly the most controversial of all his many scholarly innovations. The status model was an elaboration and refinement of ideas with which Hofstadter had been wrestling for years: the belief in "multivariate analysis" he had borrowed from Mannheim, the concern with the role of "latent" and "manifest" functions he had derived from Merton, the engagement with the psychological underpinnings of political beliefs he had taken from Freud, Lasswell, and Adorno. And while he had used the model implicitly in his discussion of the Populists, he applied it explicitly to the case of the Progressive leadership:

It is my thesis that men of this sort . . . were Progressives not because of economic deprivations but primarily because they were victims of an upheaval in status that took place in the United States during the closing decades of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. Progressivism, in short, 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. (p. 135)

The Progressives, in short, were not engaged in "interest" or "class" politics, which Hofstadter elsewhere defined as "the clash of material aims and needs among various groups and blocs," but "status" politics, "the clash of various projective rationalizations arising from status aspirations and other personal motives."¹²

Those "projective rationalizations" did not often take such cranky or irrational forms among the Progressives as they had among the Populists (although Hofstadter did perceive a strong undercurrent of nativism and moral absolutism running through Progressive political thought). The Progressives did, however, develop a preoccupation with an imagined past no less central to their ideology than the "agrarian myth" was to the Populist mind. In a world coming to be dominated by large, impersonal organizations and bureaucracies, a world in which a few immensely wealthy men seemed to be seizing control of the economy and the society, Progressives harked back to an earlier America, one with "a rather broad diffusion of wealth, status, and power, in which the man of moderate means, especially in the many small communities, could command much deference and exert much influence" (p. 135).

It was to restore that world, to destroy the illegitimate concentrations of power that threatened it, that Progressives embarked on their various reform crusades. Muckraking journalists attacked powerful urban bosses and the

great trusts. Intellectuals and professionals worked to recapture the "moral authority" to which they believed they were entitled and which they feared they had lost. Progressive politicians worked to limit the influence of party organizations and shift power to the people, who could – if properly instructed and led by an enlightened elite – be trusted to resist the destruction of liberty that the rise of organization threatened to produce:

The American tradition had been one of unusually widespread participation of the citizen in the management of affairs, both political and economic. Now the growth of the large corporation, the labor union, and the big impenetrable political machine was clotting society into large aggregates and presenting to the unorganized citizen the prospect that all these aggregates and interests would be able to act in concert and shut out those men for whom organization was difficult or impossible. . . . The central theme of Progressivism was this revolt against the industrial discipline: the Progressive movement was the complaint of the unorganized against the consequences of organization. (pp. 215–16)

Hofstadter's picture of the Progressives was from the beginning more persuasive to historians than his picture of the Populists; and so it has remained. But it too soon became the target of important and effective critiques. Much of Hofstadter's interpretation rested on his answer to a single question: Who were the Progressives? And the most successful challenges to it, therefore, began by providing very different answers to that question. Critics did not often dispute the existence of the "displaced elites" Hofstadter described or question their credentials as Progressives.¹³ They argued, rather, that such people did not constitute the whole, or even the most important segment, of the reform constituency.

David P. Thelen provided perhaps the boldest challenge by arguing that social tensions (whether the result of class or status conflicts) played almost no role in generating support for Progressive reform. Wisconsin Progressives, he argued, emerged from all classes and all social groups more or less equally; and thus the question of who the Progressives were was far less important than the question of what the Progressives wanted and what they did to achieve it. Most other studies, however, persisted in the attempt to identify a center of progressive strength and challenged Hofstadter by arguing that it lay in groups other than the "displaced elites" he described. Some located the Progressive core in groups "below" Hofstadter's old middle class; Herbert Gutman, J. Joseph Hutmacher, and John D. Buenker, for example, demonstrated how workers, immigrants, and urban machine politicians were central to some of the most important reform crusades of the era.¹⁴ Others looked "above" Hofstadter's constituency: to the same corporate elites and agents of organization against whom Hofstadter had claimed the Progressives were

reacting. Samuel P. Hays showed how upper-class business leaders dominated several municipal reform movements. Gabriel Kolko described Progressive regulatory reforms as an effort by corporate moguls to limit competition and strengthen their own economic hegemony. Robert Wiebe, the most influential of the challengers, viewed progressivism not as the nostalgic flailing of an "old" middle class, but as the purposeful efforts of members of a "new middle class," closely tied to the emerging national economy, "to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means." Progressivism was, in virtually all such accounts, not an effort to recapture the past, as Hofstadter had described it, but an adaptive, modernizing movement with its aim firmly fixed on the future.¹⁵

Ultimately, however, neither Hofstadter's "traditionalist" model of progressivism nor the "modernizing" view of some of his critics has satisfied scholars attempting to explain the enormous range and variety of early twentieth-century reform. No single class or interest group, most historians tend now to argue (accepting at least some of Thelen's contentions), can lay exclusive claim to the mantle of progressivism, just as no single ideology can account for the sweep of its concerns. Instead of identifying a single, dominant Progressive constituency or a clear, common Progressive program, scholars now tend to argue for a more pluralistic view that leaves room for many different groups and many different impulses. Some have gone so far as to challenge the existence of a Progressive movement at all; others have attempted to divide progressivism into two distinct impulses; still others have begun to look beyond the particular issues that dominated Progressive rhetoric and to place the phenomenon in the context of a much larger transformation of American political life.¹⁶ As the debate continues, still without any sign of resolution, one thing does seem clear: that Hofstadter's impressively coherent picture of the Progressive mind is inadequate as a description of anything but a single segment of the Progressive constituency, a segment far less "strategic" in the larger scheme of reform than he claimed.

Like his picture of populism, Hofstadter's analysis of progressivism suffered from its excessive reliance on an explanatory theory — the idea of the dichotomy between "status" and "interest" politics — inadequately tested against the evidence. But it suffered as well from limitations in the theory itself. At the heart of Hofstadter's notion of status was the idea he had borrowed from Merton of "functional" as opposed to "nonfunctional" behavior. When people behaved functionally, they responded directly to their material interests. But there were, alas, times when they behaved nonfunctionally, when they responded not to economic but psychic needs, and when their behavior became symbolic and self-defeating. The dichotomy between "in-

terest politics" and "status politics" accepted, in other words, the Progressive historians' assumption that all rational political behavior was rooted in economic concerns. What it rejected was the Progressives' belief that political behavior always *was* rational. The concept of "status," therefore, became a concept oddly similar to the orthodox Marxist idea of "false consciousness," attributing to politics not clearly rooted in class an aberrant, illegitimate quality.

Scholars who shared Hofstadter's dissatisfaction with the economic determinism of the Progressives and who absorbed his excitement over the ways in which psychological and sociological tools could deepen historical understanding faced a dilemma. Was it possible to accept the existence of noneconomic factors in history without accepting the rigid and pejorative picture of those factors that the "interests-status" dichotomy suggested? One solution to that dilemma was suggested by Joseph Gusfield, in his 1963 study of the American temperance movement, *Symbolic Crusade*. Gusfield shared Hofstadter's assumption that there was an identifiable difference between class and status politics; but he rejected the idea that status concerns were in any way less real or less rational than interest ones. David Thelen proposed another solution by contending that there was a realm of political concern that existed independent of either class or status tensions, that, in Wisconsin at least, "issues of corporate irresponsibility and tax evasion" touched virtually everyone, not only in terms of economic self interest but in terms of basic concepts of justice and fairness; such issues thus "transcended the social barriers that had divided individuals and groups" in the past.¹⁷

What Gusfield and Thelen suggested was perhaps the most fundamental question about the status model: Is it possible to distinguish clearly between economic and noneconomic behavior? Are battles over status and power really unrelated to economic interests? There are, of course, times when politics moves in patterns that do not reflect the economic concerns of the actors, even when people act in opposition to their own material interests. But there are also times in which battles over status and battles over class are the same battles. Workers fighting for control of the workplace, David Montgomery has shown, fought not only for the psychic rewards of greater autonomy and prestige, but for the ability to protect their economic interests. Agrarians battling the rise of corporate hegemony, many scholars of populism have argued, struggled not only against cultural obsolescence, but against the economic obsolescence that they perceived — correctly — would accompany it. Even Hofstadter's "displaced elites" were not, surely, unaware that their own economic standing was rapidly deteriorating, if not in absolute terms then certainly relative to the great new fortunes they could see spring-

ing up around them; and any definition of material interests that does not leave room for the sense of relative deprivation excludes a large portion of the economic concerns of twentieth-century Americans.¹⁸

In the last years of his life, when Hofstadter attempted on occasion to evaluate the most important achievements of his remarkable scholarly career, he expressed particular pride in having helped to introduce "complexity" to the study of history. It was a real and important contribution; in the wake of Hofstadter's work, few historians attempted to fit all historical causation into a neat pattern of clashing economic interests. But Hofstadter worried that this "keener sense of the structural complexity of our society in the past" might produce as well a paralysis of intellect and a "political immobility," that both historical study and political thought would descend into a crippling nominalism that would destroy the possibilities for coherent understanding or effective action.¹⁹ Perhaps it had been that fear that led Hofstadter and others to fit their ideas of complexity into the restrictive terms of the "status-interest" model, to replace the simplistic determinism of the Progressive historians with a similarly rigid, if less one-dimensional framework of their own. For Hofstadter had identified a dilemma fundamental to historical studies, one that remains — and will perhaps forever remain — unresolved. Is it possible for scholars to take into account the enormous range of factors that affect human motivation and historical causation and still bring coherence to their picture of the past?

A "total history" of human experience will, clearly, remain forever beyond the grasp of scholars. But thanks in large part to Hofstadter's work — in *The Age of Reform* and elsewhere — it seems unlikely, as he once feared, that "the very idea of complexity will come under fire once again," or that historians will soon argue "that most things in life and in history are not complex but really quite simple." The repudiation by historians of many of the central ideas of Hofstadter's portrait of populism and progressivism is, therefore, to a large degree a measure of his success. For it is the inadequacy of the "status-interest" model's allowance for complexity, not the complexity itself, that has proved its most crippling feature.²⁰

Hofstadter's analyses of populism and progressivism, controversial as they were, moved immediately to the center of scholarly debate and framed the discussion of both phenomena for decades. His brief analysis of the New Deal met resistance from the beginning and has never had much impact on subsequent interpretations. And yet while the central sections of *The Age of Reform* now seem less persuasive than they once did, the interpretation of the New Deal seems in certain ways more compelling than its earlier critics were willing to admit.

Populism and progressivism had, Hofstadter argued, been part of a long continuum of reform. The New Deal, he claimed, was a sharp break with that continuum, largely unaffected (and hence largely unmarred) by the backward-looking moralism of its predecessors, committed instead to the solution of immediate, debilitating economic problems. No grand strategies or philosophical visions there; Roosevelt and his circle were engaged in a "chaos of experimentation" (p. 307).

Although the New Dealers paid lip service to old Progressive verities, in practice they "bypassed, sidestepped" the old Progressive issues. The New Deal made no effort to combat the political machines; instead, Roosevelt attempted to conciliate and forge alliances with them. The New Deal "never developed a clear or consistent line on business consolidation"; the issue of monopoly became secondary to a "restless groping for a means to bring recovery." By the late 1930s, the New Deal, without ever expressing (or even recognizing) how sharply it was breaking with the reform past, had revolutionized American liberalism. It had stripped it of its old nostalgic moralism and had added to it "a social-democratic tinge that had never before been present in American reform movements." In the future, liberals would be less concerned with "entrepreneurial" reform and would be committed instead to social legislation: "social security, unemployment insurance, wages and hours, and housing." The New Deal, Hofstadter wrote, "represented the triumph of economic emergency and human needs over inherited notions and inhibitions" (pp. 307-16).

There are many problems with this portrait, as critics were quick to point out almost as soon as the book appeared. Hofstadter clearly underestimated the degree to which Progressive ideology had influenced New Deal policy-makers – in part, perhaps, because his view of Progressive ideology had been so narrow and incomplete.²¹ At the same time, however, Hofstadter had touched on something important when he claimed that liberal ideology emerged from the 1930s fundamentally transformed. That it did so was not, perhaps, because the New Dealers themselves had openly repudiated the grip of the past in favor of pragmatic experimentation; it was because, in the course of more than a decade of political and ideological pulling and tugging, new ideas had slowly and haltingly emerged in response to the failure of old ones to deal with pressing realities. The antimonopoly impulse had ceased to play more than an occasional rhetorical role in reform ideology; the planning ideal had shifted its focus away from the structure of capitalism and toward Keynesian and social welfare goals. The language of liberalism, and the substantive direction of liberalism, had changed. Hofstadter's explanation of how and why was cursory and inadequate; but his identification of that change – and his challenge to the then prevailing view of a long, continuous

stream of reform culminating in the New Deal and validating postwar liberal goals²² — was an important and generally unappreciated accomplishment.

Critics of modern historiography have spent a large and perhaps inordinate amount of time and energy arguing over whether Hofstadter was truly a member of the "consensus school" that came to dominate historical writing in the 1950s. The answer, of course, depends on how that school is defined.²³ Hofstadter certainly shared, and indeed was among the first to state, the "consensus" assumption that economic conflict was not the dominant factor in American history, that beneath the disputes and controversies of the past (and, presumably, the present) lay a "common climate of American opinion," a "general framework" of shared ideas resting on "a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition," and a general acceptance of industrial capitalism.²⁴ Conflicts that seemed on the surface profound, among them the reform battles of the Populists and Progressives, had taken place within a relatively narrow ideological framework. Hence, even the most strenuous critics of the American political and economic structure could not (or would not) envision a genuinely radical alternative to it; and they vented their frustrations, therefore, not through attacks on bourgeois capitalism, but through attachment to "symbols" and "projective rationalizations."

At times in his work (although only passingly in *The Age of Reform*), Hofstadter attempted to qualify his attachment to these consensus assumptions. He pointed to those parts of the American past (the Revolution, the Civil War, racial and religious conflict) that could not be adequately explained in this way; and he conceded that "it is a valid comment on the limits of consensus history to insist that in one form or another conflict finally does remain, and ought to remain, somewhere near the center of our focus of attention."²⁵ Yet Hofstadter's purpose in most of his own work, and certainly in *The Age of Reform*, was not an effort to place conflict "near the center of our focus of attention." It was precisely the opposite: to refute "the almost obsessive concern with conflict as the central theme of historical writing" that his generation of scholars had inherited from their Progressive forebears.²⁶ Hofstadter was too sensitive and subtle a historian not to recognize the limitations of the approach. But in at least one sense, he stands firmly within, indeed very near the center of, the consensus school.

Hofstadter did not, however, always share, and at times strenuously opposed, another distinguishing assumption of many consensus scholars: the assumption that this "common climate of opinion," this lack of fundamental conflict, was a good and necessary thing that accounted for America's stability, freedom, and progress. This celebratory use of consensus is most com-

monly identified with the work of Daniel Boorstin,²⁷ but a similar (if usually more muted) tone can be found in the work of innumerable scholars of the 1950s and 1960s. Only rarely, however, can it be found in the work of Richard Hofstadter. It may be too much to say, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. did in a 1969 essay, that Hofstadter viewed consensus from a "radical perspective . . . and deplored it." But it is certainly true that he viewed it "from the outside," with considerable skepticism, and with occasional alarm.²⁸ He was not, of course, in any basic sense a critic of American capitalism or American democracy; he was fundamentally unsympathetic to the alternatives. He did, however, recognize that the narrow range of acceptable opinion in American politics, and the centrality within that range of the acquisitive values of competitive capitalism, exacted a significant price — both from the nation's public discourse and from the private lives of its people. The pragmatic opportunism that had played so central a role in shaping American institutions and American values had certain attractions; but it had failed, he believed, to provide a philosophically consistent or morally compelling basis for democratic politics.²⁹ A society whose greatest political triumph was the New Deal — that stumbling, chaotic exercise in political and economic self-preservation, unconnected to any coherent philosophy or moral vision — was not a society in which a sensitive humanist could take unambiguous pride.

Hofstadter was, in the end, a man caught between two competing, and perhaps incompatible, visions of society. As a scholar committed to the intellectual life and to the tolerant, cosmopolitan values he believed that life represented, he mistrusted the politics of unrestrained popular will and admired the conservative, pluralistic character of American life for providing protections against the far less attractive, far more menacing alternatives. Yet as a twentieth-century man sensitive to the unfulfilled yearnings of many of his world's and his nation's people, he could not help wishing, even if without real hope or definition, for something more. Perhaps that was why, in looking back upon America's past and ahead to its future, in one of his last published essays, he could summon up finally only grudging praise and tempered optimism:

When one considers American history as a whole, it is hard to think of any very long period in which it could be said that the country has been consistently well governed. And yet its political system is, on the whole, a resilient and well-seasoned one, and on the strength of its history one must assume that it can summon enough talent and good will to cope with its afflictions. To cope with them — but not, I think, to master them in any thoroughly decisive or admirable fashion. The nation seems to slouch onward into its uncertain future like some huge inarticulate beast, too much attainted by wounds and ailments to be robust, but too strong and resourceful to succumb.³⁰

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1. Robert Wiebe, "Views But No Vista," *The Progressive* 33 (1969): 47.
2. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (1949). For a thoughtful assessment of Hofstadter's political and intellectual assumptions, and of the role they played in shaping his scholarship, see Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 976-81. Singal describes Hofstadter as a historical modernist, whose outlook reflected a set of values he, and others, have described as "cosmopolitanism" — an essentially urban cast of mind and one that attributed particular importance to such worldly values as tolerance of diversity and skepticism of inherited faiths. Hofstadter himself spoke frequently of his reverence for the skeptical, relativistic world of scholarship and — sometimes by implication, sometimes explicitly — of his mistrust of provincialism. For other discussions of the emergence of this "cosmopolitan ideal," see Terry A. Cooney, "Cosmopolitan Values and the Identification of Reaction: *Partisan Review* in the 1930s," *Journal of American History* 68 (1981): 580-98; and David A. Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975): 133-51. Richard Pells attempts to place Hofstadter (and *The Age of Reform* in particular) in the context of the intellectual history of the 1950s in *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1985), pp. 150-55 and ch. 3 *passim*.
3. David Hawke, "Interview: Richard Hofstadter," *History* 3 (1960): 136; Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (1955).
4. See, e.g., Charles A. and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927); and Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents of American Thought*, 3 vols. (1927-1930).
5. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (1957), esp. pp. 58-70; Lionel Trilling, "Reality in America," *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), pp. 3-21; C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (1951), pp. 239-58 and *passim*; Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enlarged ed. (1968), pp. 73-118. Hofstadter acknowledged his debts to these and other social scientists in his essay "History and the Social Sciences," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (1956), pp. 359-70 and in the introduction to *The Age of Reform*, p. 13. Fuller discussions of the importance of Hofstadter's interdisciplinary interests can be found in Singal, "Beyond Consensus," pp. 986-88; Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn, "Richard Hofstadter: The Ironies of an American Historian," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974): 7-11; Richard Gillam, "Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills, and 'the Critical Ideal,'" *The American Scholar* 57 (1977-78): 72-73, 79-81; and Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter: A Progress," in *The Hofstadter Aegis* (1974), pp. 309-10, 317-22.
6. C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *The Burden of Southern History* (1968), pp. 141-66 (originally published in *The American Scholar* in 1959). Rogin's argument involved, as well, a much broader critique of the pluralistic assumptions that dominated American intellectual life and a charge that the work of Hofstadter and others represented an antidemocratic elitism.
7. Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (1962). See also the following essays by Pollack: "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of 'The Age of Reform,'" *Journal of Southern History* 26 (1960): 478-500; "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review* 68 (1962): 76-80; and "Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism, and the Historian," *Agricultural History* 39 (1965): 59-67, from which the quoted passages are drawn (p. 59). Rejoinders include Oscar Handlin, "Reconsidering the Populists," *Agricultural History* 39 (1965): 68-74, and Irwin Unger, "Critique of Norman Pollack's 'Fear of Man,'" *ibid.*: 75-80. On the especially sensitive question of Populist anti-Semitism, see, in addition to the Pollack and Handlin essays above, Handlin, "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth

eth Century," *Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (1951): 323–44; and John Higham, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (1957): 559–79.

8. Bruce Palmer, in *Man Over Money: The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (1980), offered an even starker statement of some of Goodwyn's assumptions, emphasizing the Populist critique of the acquisitive individualism of American society.

9. Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (1983), esp. pp. 1–10, 137–69, 269–89.

10. James Turner, "Understanding the Populists," *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 354–73. Martin Ridge, "Populism Redux: John D. Hicks and *The Populist Revolt*," *Reviews in American History* 13 (1983): 142–54, offers an overview of Populist historiography.

11. Hofstadter's portrait of the Progressives drew from (although it did not always fully coincide with) earlier studies by George Mowry and Alfred D. Chandler, both of whom had emphasized the relatively affluent, middle-class origins of reformers, hence raising a challenge to the prevailing stereotype of reformers as tribunes of the common man. See George Mowry, *The California Progressives* (1951) and Alfred D. Chandler, "The Origins of Progressive Leadership," in Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* vol. 8 (1954), pp. 1462–65.

12. Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (1964), p. 84. This is a revised edition of *The New American Right* (1955). Hofstadter's essay appears as well in his *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1965), where the quoted passage can be found on p. 53. See also Paula Fass, "Richard Hofstadter," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 17 (1983), pp. 219–22.

13. Richard B. Sherman, however, did raise questions about the correlation between social standing and Progressive tendencies. In a study of political leaders in Massachusetts, he found that those who opposed the Progressives came from the same social background as the reformers. "If there was a status revolution," he asked, "how do we explain the difference in reaction to it?" See "The Status Revolution and Massachusetts Progressive Leadership," *Political Science Quarterly* 78 (1963): 59–65.

14. David P. Thelen, "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism," *Journal of American History* 56 (1969): 323–41; Thelen, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885–1900* (1972), *passim*; J. Joseph Huthmacher, "Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 59 (1962): 231–41, and *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (1968), chs. 2–3; Herbert G. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1976), pp. 79–117; John D. Buenker, "The Urban Political Machine and the Seventeenth Amendment," *Journal of American History* 56 (1969): 305–22. See also Richard Abrams, *Conservatism in a Progressive Era: Massachusetts Politics, 1900–1912* (1964), pp. 132–33, which identifies the working-class Irish as the truly reform-minded "insurgent" groups in Massachusetts.

15. Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 55 (1964): 159–69; Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (1967), p. 166 and *passim*. In an earlier study, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (1962), Wiebe argued, like Kolko, that business leaders had been at the forefront of Progressive reform efforts, although he was more careful than Kolko to distinguish among different segments of the business community.

16. See, e.g., Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for the Progressive Movement," *American Quarterly* 22 (1970): 20–34; and John D. Buenker, "The Progressive Era: A Search for a Synthesis," *Mid-America* 51 (1969): 175–93, both of whom attack the notion of a Progressive "movement." The work of Richard L. McCormick on the rise of a politics of interest groups to replace the older politics of party is particularly important. See, especially, *From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893–1910* (1981). A particularly valuable discussion of the many-sided debate over the nature of progressivism may be found in Daniel Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 113–32.

17. Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (1963), esp. pp. 1-24, 166-88; Thelen, *The New Citizenship*, pp. 2-3, 309-10; Thelen, "Social Tensions," pp. 323-30. See also Elkins and McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter," pp. 338-42.
18. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (1979); Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*; Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*. An early effort to express this objection, although one weakened by its stridency, is William Appleman Williams, "The Age of Re-Forming History," *The Nation* (June 30, 1956), pp. 552-54.
19. Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (1968), p. 466.
20. Ibid. For a provocative discussion of this and other dilemmas facing modern historians, see Bernard Bailyn, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 1-24.
21. See, esp., Ellis Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (1966). Otis Graham, *Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (1967) provides a different perspective on the role of Progressive ideology in the 1930s.
22. See Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (1952).
23. The most thoughtful efforts to define consensus historiography have come from John Higham, who first gave the school its name in his famous article "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary* (February 1959), pp. 93-100. He has since revised and moderated this initial assessment in *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1965), pp. 212-32.
24. Hofstadter first expressed what became the basic assumptions of "consensus history" in his brief preface to *The American Political Tradition* (1948), pp. v-xi.
25. Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, p. 458.
26. Hofstadter, "History and Sociology in the United States," in Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Sociology and History: Methods* (1968), p. 18.
27. See, e.g., Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) and *The Americans*, 3 vols. (1958-73).
28. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Richard Hofstadter," in Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks, eds., *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians* (1969), p. 289. Hofstadter offered a series of ambiguous assessments of his own of the consensus school, and of his place within it; see, e.g., "Communication," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954): 328, and *The Progressive Historians* (1968), pp. 437-66.
29. In this, he shared many of the reservations expressed by Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (1955).
30. Hofstadter, "Reflections on Violence in the United States," in Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (1970), p. 43.