

FORUM: RICHARD HOFSTADTER'S *THE AGE OF REFORM* AFTER FIFTY YEARS

[Note: The following two essays are revised versions of presentations made by Robert Johnston and Gillis Harp at the annual meeting of the British American Nineteenth Century Historians (BrANCH) in Cambridge, England, in October 2005. BrANCH invited SHGAPE to help organize the conference. Based on a suggestion by Robert Johnston, SHGAPE contributed a session commemorating Richard Hofstadter's book on the Populist and Progressive movements, first published in 1955 and much-acclaimed and much-criticized since. While Professor Johnston had the assignment of assessing *The Age of Reform* in retrospect, Gillis Harp attempted to put the book within its contemporary intellectual context. Beyond evaluating this noteworthy book, the session had the intention as well of prompting memories from a few people in attendance who knew Hofstadter as a friend and colleague. In this, the session succeeded, reminding those present that *The Age of Reform* reflected the personality of its author and is more than a historiographic interpretation against which one measures one's own views.]

***The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On*¹**

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When we attend academic history conferences, it has become common to hold sessions honoring important books of the moment. This makes considerable sense, as authors get to engage with thoughtful critics in a process that, we hope, advances the discipline.

What, then, might be the point of holding a session in honor of a book published long ago—indeed, one as ancient as fifty years old? The minimal-

¹I dedicate this essay to my fellow Jewish populist, Bernie Weisberger—a baseball fanatic who's always kept the progressive, democratic faith and who provided important criticisms of a draft. I first presented these musings as a talk at the joint meeting of the British American Nineteenth Century Historians and the Society of the History of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era at Cambridge University in October 2005, and the animated reaction I received there proved quite useful. I'd also like to acknowledge the aid of Paul Bass, Robert Devens, Gillis Harp, Laura Kalman, Jeff Ostler, Charles Postel, and, for talented research support, Milena Sjekloca and Meghan Thomas. Most of all, I wish to thank Alan Lessoff for inviting the essay and for his excellent intellectual challenges. A note on spelling: while scholars have begun to prefer "antisemitism," most of the titles and quotes cited here use the older "anti-Semitism."

ist reason might be that we are historians, and so we naturally look to the past for interest and inspiration. That would make sense, except that historians, ironically more than scholars in related disciplines, tend to cannibalize their predecessors. Sociologists, of course, still actively engage Weber, Durkheim and Marx, and even—looking to the American midcentury—Richard Hofstadter’s Columbia University colleagues, C. Wright Mills and Robert Merton.

Yet who are the comparable figures for the historical profession? Thucydides? I actually taught *The History of the Peloponnesian War* a fair amount recently in my course introducing new graduate students to the historical profession, but I’m not quite sure the Athenian general counts as our near contemporary. Braudel, perhaps? Alas, few Americanists these days possess the long duration necessary to read his books. A better candidate is E. P. Thompson, certainly one of my heroes, whose first major work, a biography of William Morris, coincidentally also appeared the same year as the book that will serve as the focus of this essay. Alas, who—at least on our side of the Atlantic—today reads more than the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*? Add to our lack of recognized great ancestors the increasingly trendy denigration of historiographical discussion—DO NOT DISCUSS OTHER SCHOLARS IN THE TEXT, ONLY IN THE FOOTNOTES, AND ONLY THEN IF YOU REALLY HAVE TO, says the hip graduate advisor to her Ph.D. students—and we are increasingly cultivating a historical discipline blind to its own past.

Assuming that my kind audience shares an opposition to this kind of self-imposed amnesia, let me offer other possible answers to the question of why we might want to revisit an old book. We might say that such a text is more useful as a primary source rather than as a secondary source, that it provides an excellent window into the temper of its times. Or, because we now write much less gracefully than did the oldsters, we might get a few tips for refining our prose from the Parkmans, Prescotts, or even Potters of our profession. Of course, there is always the most satisfying reason to dig a fifty-year-old book out of the archeological trash pit: to prove it utterly wrong and thereby demonstrate our own enlightenment!

Yet for the honoree of the hour, such reasons are insufficient. For I come today not to bury Richard Hofstadter, but to praise him. I hope to show today how very alive *The Age of Reform* remains. And not just in the ways we conventionally pay tribute to this book, by lavishing well-deserved attention to its felicitous prose or to its significance in the historiographical tradition. Instead, I want to argue that Hofstadter was—and more importantly still is—actually *right* about matters that remain crucial to how we think about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

In this necessarily brief essay, I will only explore two of the most important parts of the book. I first want to show that we need to take more seriously Hofstadter's charges of Populist antisemitism and conspiracy thinking. Second, I will show that despite his problematic concentration on status anxiety, Hofstadter actually liked progressive reform—as should we.

The Political Ideology of Populism, Revisited in an Age of Populist Bigotry

To begin my reflections on Hofstadter's Populist problem, I want to emphasize that I consider myself a radical populist. I come from a western agrarian background, and I don't just like—I love—the populist heritage in America, considering it to be the most distinctive and democratic of our political traditions. In my book *The Radical Middle Class*, I castigated other supposedly left-leaning scholars for their dismissal of populist direct democracy as racist, reactionary, homophobic, xenophobic (well, you get the idea, the list could continue indefinitely). On the other hand, I'm also Jewish, which may or may not be relevant.²

Hofstadter is clearly one of the most powerful spokesmen for this essentially anti-democratic cast of thinking that I find so troubling.³ So why am I defending him? For one thing, being anti-democratic does not necessarily make one incorrect. Despite the often compelling criticism of Hofstadter, he comes out of the fray today looking less bruised and battered than during the heyday of radical hopes in the sixties and seventies. So, at the risk of being labeled a self-hating Jewish populist, let me perversely try to rehabilitate one of the most maligned arguments from the first section of *The Age*

²Peter Novick makes a compelling case as to why religious and regional background made a significant difference during the 1950s and 1960s in the raging debate over Populism that Hofstadter sparked. "With minor exceptions," Novick writes, "those critical of the Populists were Jews and from the Northeast; those defending them were gentiles, and from the South or Midwest. This feature of the controversy was well known to the participants and many contemporary observers, but was usually mentioned only obliquely, if at all." Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 339. Novick goes on to comment wisely on "the most compelling reason why a group of the background of Hofstadter, Bell, Lipset, and their friends should have taken such a uniformly and exaggeratedly bleak view of the Populists: they were all only one generation removed from the Eastern European *shtetl*, where insurgent gentile peasants spelled pogroms" (341). More generally, a central theme of David S. Brown's fine book, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago, 2006), is the way in which Hofstadter's complex ethnic identity (his father was Jewish and his mother Lutheran) influenced his scholarship.

I should point out here that I myself far too casually and quickly dismissed Hofstadter's perspective on the Populists in *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton, 2003), 87-88.

³Daniel Joseph Singal argues that Hofstadter remained a committed democrat, and Michael Kazin calls him "an egalitarian soul who kept his eyes wide open." Yet what Hofstadter kept his eyes open for most was The People. Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 89 (Oct. 1984): 991-92; Michael Kazin, "Hofstadter Lives: Political Culture and Temperament in the Work of an American Historian," *Review in American History* 27 (June 1999): 346.

of *Reform*—a segment that has so often been declared “just plain wrong.”⁴

What exactly did Hofstadter say about Populist antisemitism and conspiracy thinking? First, let’s be sure to note the qualifications in Hofstadter’s perspective. In the introduction to *Age of Reform*, Hofstadter made clear (one of his favorite locutions) that he was not “hostile” to the “Populist-Progressive tradition,” that he was in fact “criticizing largely from within.” Neither movement—and it’s also important to remember how much Hofstadter linked Populism with Progressivism—was “foolish and destructive”; “Of their substantial net value in the main stream of American political experience I have no doubt.” All Americans were in “enormous debt” to the Populists, who had democratized and humanized an American system that might have otherwise become “nothing but a jungle.” “There is indeed much that is good and usable in our Populist past,” Hofstadter remarked, pointing toward the Pops’ advocacy of federal intervention into the economy and to their “profoundly radical and humane” attempt to “cut across the old barriers of race.” Over and over, Hofstadter pled for complexity and ambiguity, not condemnation. Furthermore, as Robert Collins has shown, Hofstadter in his post-*Age of Reform* correspondence insisted on his respect for the Populists and genuinely professed not to be able to fathom why readers considered his portrait of them unfriendly. Writing to C. Vann Woodward in 1963, Hofstadter characterized the Pops as “pretty good guys,” and later in the decade he even went so far as to state, “If I had known what an imbecile fuss would be raised about my having mentioned the occasional anti-Semitic rhetoric among the Populists, I would either have dropped it as not worth the trouble or else spent even more time than I did in clarifying what I was saying.”⁵

All that said, Hofstadter without a doubt wanted to even the score, to balance out the “modern liberal’s indulgent view of the farmers’ revolt” and

⁴David Greenberg, “Richard Hofstadter: The Pundit’s Favorite Historian,” *Slate*, June 7, 2006, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2143217>>, (Nov. 29, 2006).

⁵Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 12, 17, 18, 61; Robert M. Collins, “The Originality Trap: Richard Hofstadter on Populism,” *Journal of American History* 76 (June 1989): 150-67 (quote 153); Richard Kostelanetz, *Master Minds: Portraits of Contemporary American Artists and Intellectuals* (New York, 1969), 167.

Hofstadter also admitted that “to discuss the broad ideology of the Populists does them some injustice, for it was in their concrete programs that they added most constructively to our political life, and in their more general picture of the world that they were most credulous and vulnerable.” Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 61. All this said, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., did have a point when he remarked that “on balance these passages in *The Age of Reform* were rather like the eulogy of the bourgeoisie in the *Communist Manifesto*.” See Schlesinger’s “Richard Hofstadter,” in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York, 1969), 302.

More generally, Hofstadter deserves credit for bringing the ideology of the Populists into the historical conversation. This is an area that will receive a substantial boost from Charles Postel’s *The Populist Vision* (New York, forthcoming), the most valuable intellectual history of the group ever written.

emphasize the Populists' "limitations." Hofstadter's condescension began in the opening pages, as he casually related how he uncovered in Populism (and Progressivism, too) "much that was retrograde and delusive, a little that was vicious, and a good deal that was comic." From the vantage point of the age of McCarthy, Hofstadter sought famously to highlight the "sour...illiberal and ill-tempered" qualities of Populism that he believed "foreshadow[ed] some aspects of the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time." And, of course, he zeroed in on the Populists' conspiratorial mindset, which "frequently link[ed] with a kind of rhetorical anti-Semitism."⁶

As to the latter, Hofstadter to be sure overreached, and he did so in extremely problematic ways. When he wrote that "the Greenback-Populist tradition activated most of what we have of modern popular anti-Semitism in the United States," he offered almost no evidence to support such a long-term connection. The correctives offered by Woodward in his critique of Hofstadter and other 1950s partisans of the vital center, by Walter Nugent in *The Tolerant Populists*, and even by the much-maligned Norman Pollack in several writings remain important in pointing out how little the mass of ordinary Populists succumbed to antisemitism as well as how Hofstadter misread authors such as Ignatius Donnelly. Donnelly, for example, certainly indulged in classic stereotypes, but he also went out of his way to condemn the historical persecution of the Jews. And in the larger context, Populist antisemitism seems to have paled in comparison to the upper-class antisemitism of the national elite. The fates, therefore, might have been kinder to Hofstadter if he had listened to his cherished students Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, who upon reading the manuscript for *Age of Reform* desperately pled with their mentor to strike the discussion of antisemitism.⁷

⁶Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 47, 60, 11, 19-20, 77. A note on the condescension: Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn cleverly, and accurately, noted that "Hofstadter did indeed view the populists of the 1890s from a distance, somewhat as an anthropologist might look upon Andaman Islanders." Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn, "Richard Hofstadter: The Ironies of an American Historian," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (Feb. 1974): 6.

⁷Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 80; C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *American Scholar* 28 (1959): 55-72; Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago, 1963); Norman Pollack, "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review* 68 (Oct. 1962): 76-80; Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of 'The Age of Reform,'" *Journal of Southern History* 26 (Nov. 1960): 478-500; Brown, *Hofstadter*, 106-07. Arthur Liebman follows Nugent and Pollack in minimizing the importance of Populist antisemitism. See Liebman, "Anti-Semitism in the Left?" in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Urbana, 1986), 335-37. A still valuable essay that early on offered a gentle rebuke to Hofstadter and that pointed to the Populists' complex views of Jews is John Higham's "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (March 1957): 559-78.

Elkins and McKittrick publicly repeated their concerns after Hofstadter's death. "Those who took particular offense at his treatment of the Populists did so with cause," they wrote. "He certainly overdrew the anti-Semitism he imputed to them: whatever anti-Semitism there was among the Populists probably had few or no practical consequences, and was no more

And yet: Hofstadter's detractors have not been willing to admit how genuinely mixed and confused is the historical record. Without a doubt many Populists did engage in a search for the "Shylock" bankers who had come to control the global economy, and most of these writers were not innocent of the cultural work of the term "Shylock." Several prominent Populist authors vigorously named the House of Rothschild as the reason for agrarian misery, and still others told of scheming, devious, inbred, commercial Jews. Mary E. Lease labeled President Grover Cleveland "the agent of Jewish bankers and British gold." When Hofstadter complained that "nothing has been said of its tincture of anti-Semitism," he was correct both about the selective ignorance of scholars as well as the reality of the Populist movement's bigotry.⁸

Jeffrey Ostler, in one of the finest articles ever published about Populism, puts this so-called "soft side" of Populism into perspective through a fully historical exploration of the Populists' conspiracy thinking. While criticizing Hofstadter for neglecting the economic hardship that inspired a radically democratic Populist reform program, Ostler even more powerfully indicts New Left historians, especially Lawrence Goodwyn, for ignoring the fact that conspiracy thinking did saturate much of the Populist press. Ordinary Pops read and lavished praise on writings such as Sarah Emery's *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*, in the process composing a damning and extraordinarily vivid case against malign British bankers. Such conspiracy thinking was, however, neither irrational nor hateful. Ostler encourages us to see the Populist conspiratorial mindset as part of the republican heritage that inspired similar beliefs among the Founding Fathers as they struggled against the British and among abolitionists as they fought against the slave power. And, after all, bankers, and British bankers in particular, *did* possess extensive control over the American economy and

pronounced than that to be found in various other social groups." Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "Richard Hofstadter: A Progress" in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, ed. Elkins and McKittrick (New York, 1974), 327-28. Indeed, the year before his death Hofstadter himself admitted to Otis Graham that antisemitism flourished in the cities as well as in the countryside during the 1890s, acknowledging this to be "a serious deficiency" that "inferentially suggested that the Populists were the sole or primary carriers of this kind of feeling." Collins, "Originality Trap," 155-56.

⁸Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 79, 61. One of the best contributions to this controversy is Michael M. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, CT, 1979), 174-84. Dobkowski makes clear the non-trivial nature of Populist antisemitism while at the same time showing that such sentiment was only a minor version of nineteenth-century American Jew hatred. Dobkowski, therefore, sensibly boxes both sides of the historians' debate gently in the ears.

Overall, one can't help but sympathize with Hofstadter's comment in a 1963 letter to Woodward that the issue of Populist bigotry "was of just enough importance to warrant, in all of the hundreds of pages that have been written abt free silver and populism, that someone should write a few pages on the subject, lest it be suppressed altogether." Collins, "Originality Trap," 161.

were responsible for some significant part of the hardship of American farmers. Furthermore, the Populists almost always targeted these bankers, rather than Jews.⁹

But not *always* always. Some Populists, Ostler convincingly argues, were “susceptible to the anti-Semitism that pervaded American culture.” Because we refuse to reckon with this part of *The Age of Reform*, we end up possessing few tools for figuring out how the Populists “might have given the theory of an English conspiracy an anti-Semitic turn.” In 1991 Goodwyn tried to bury his urbane predecessor, announcing that “the world of populism constructed by Hofstadter now languishes in ruin.” Not true! Hofstadter, in fact, did set the correct agenda as we seek the reasons for populism’s twentieth-century rightward trajectory while at the same time recognizing—and embracing—Populism’s democratic qualities. As Ostler concludes, “Although 1890s Populism was generally a progressive movement, it contained elements that might have had reactionary implications in later movements that did not possess its analysis of capitalism and program for reform.”¹⁰

A not-so-parenthetical comment on Ostler’s article: many of the virtuous Populist gatekeepers who reviewed the article for major journals did their best to prevent his dangerous essay from ever seeing the light of day. Be that as it may, the important point here is that Ostler helps us understand what we should have known all along from Richard Hofstadter himself: that the Populist moment of the 1890s bequeathed to its various populist successors a suspicion of elites and a taste for conspiratorial explanations that have at times nurtured antisemitism and other forms of bigotry. To point to the Populists as the exclusive, or even a primary, source of modern American antisemitism is itself an exercise in scapegoating. Yet in the end, populists like me should be mature enough to embrace the complexities of our own tradition, just as we justly ask liberals to take responsibility for the darker side of theirs—such as, historically, the Vietnam War (which was worse, I dare say, than Populist antisemitism) and, currently, their own Hofstadterian half-spoken dread of the masses. Without the guiding hand of *The Age of*

⁹Jeffrey Ostler, “The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism,” *Agricultural History* 69 (Winter 1995): 1-27. Note Hofstadter himself on these issues: “If we tend to be too condescending to the Populists at this point, it may be necessary to remind ourselves that they had seen so much bribery and corruption, particularly on the part of the railroads, that they had before them a convincing model of the management of affairs through conspiratorial behavior. Indeed, what makes conspiracy theories so widely acceptable is that they usually contain a germ of truth.” Hofstadter also recognized that Jefferson, Lincoln and other respectable leaders in the American political tradition at times embraced conspiratorial thinking. Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 71-72.

¹⁰Ostler, “Rhetoric of Conspiracy,” 26; Lawrence Goodwyn, “Rethinking ‘Populism’: Paradoxes of Historiography and Democracy,” *Telos* 88 (Summer 1991): 42, quoted in Ostler, “Rhetoric of Conspiracy,” 2; Ostler, “Rhetoric of Conspiracy,” 27.

Reform, scholars and citizens alike will remain seriously hampered as we grapple with the less-than-angelic qualities of mass movements.¹¹

And Hofstadter's Progressives Are Kind of O.K., Too! Really!

I dearly love the Populists, but that doesn't mean that I don't also feel a deep admiration that perhaps borders on romantic attraction for much of the Progressive reform impulse. In an earlier article in the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, I argued that, contrary to plenty of liberal and leftist castigation of the Progressives, their era produced many of modern America's most democratic political movements and experiments. While always recognizing the many anti-democratic legacies of the early twentieth century, we need to leave behind political despair and continue to "re-democratize the Progressive Era."¹²

To prolong my streak of perversity, I am going to argue, in a brief and rather hit-and-run manner, that Richard Hofstadter, at least in part, agreed with me on how to evaluate the democratic legacy of the Progressives—that he may have actually kind of liked them. Once more, I by no means wish to deny that Hofstadter was intensely suspicious of much of the political culture that the Progressives created, nor to deny that Hofstadter's generally one-dimensional characterization had a pernicious influence on future scholarship. Above all, Hofstadter's methodologically flawed insistence on status anxiety as an explanation was intended to place the Progressives only one step up from their Populist cousins in their deluded attachment to an older lost world of Yankee homogeneity and entrepreneurial ambition. Hofstadter's Progressives, when not launching dangerous crusades against alcohol or immigrants, embraced a middle-class moralism, an "absolutist enthusiasm," that prevented true reform. And in any case, the movement didn't really seek that much, for the Progressive was "visibly, palpably, almost pathetically respectable." The generic reformer's failure to link up

¹¹Which is not to say that we will always find such demons in latter-day populist movements. Alan Brinkley a quarter of a century ago noted the relative lack of antisemitism among those inspired by Huey Long, or even by the early Father Charles Coughlin. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982). More recently, Michael Kazin has shown how antisemitism, while not nonexistent, "was quite rare" among the thousands of ordinary folks who wrote to William Jennings Bryan—and how Bryan himself was comfortable speaking in synagogues and explicitly repudiated hatred of Jews. Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 2006), 325-26, n. 25, 272-73, 165-66, 204. Norman Pollack said the same thing about Bryan decades ago in "Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism" and "Hofstadter on Populism," which includes this quotation from the Great Commoner: "I do not know of any class of our people, who by reason of their history, can better sympathize with the struggling masses in this campaign than can the Hebrew race" (494).

¹²Robert D. Johnston, "Re-Democratizing the Progressive Era: The Politics of Progressive Era Political Historiography," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (Jan. 2002): 68-92.

with the truly exploited “reduced the social range and the radical drive of his program and kept him genteel, proper, and safe.”¹³

In defending Hofstadter, I by no means wish to sustain this general interpretation, much less many of his particular judgments. I am particularly critical of his dismissal of direct democracy reforms such as the initiative, referendum, and recall—although at least he noticed them, unlike most latter-day scholars. Yet Hofstadter did go beyond his gentle condemnation to recognize significant political merit—might we even say virtue?—in the perspective of the Progressives. He clearly appreciated that they “carried on a tolerant and mutually profitable dialogue with the Socialists of the period.” Their semi-proletarian orientation allowed the Progressives to sympathize with labor and, more generally, pass “one of the primary tests of the mood of a society...whether its comfortable people tend to identify, psychologically, with the power and achievements of the very successful or with the needs and sufferings of the underprivileged. In a large and striking measure the Progressive agitations turned the human sympathies of the people downward rather than upward in the social scale.”¹⁴

I even have a hunch that, despite all of Hofstadter’s hard-boiled condemnation of moralistic politics, he actually had a secret soft spot for some of the Progressives’ traditionalist values. For example, the title of the final section of *The Age of Reform* is “The New Opportunism,” and the contrast it makes between technocratic New Dealers and ethical Progressives immediately follows an intriguingly aloof reflection from Hofstadter: “The spectacle of liberals defending...bigness and concentration in industry suggests that that anti-monopoly sentiment which was so long at the heart of Progressive thinking is no longer its central theme. The generation for which Wilson and Brandeis spoke looked to economic life as a field for the expression of character; modern liberals seem to think of it quite exclusively as a field in which certain results are to be expected. It is this change in the moral stance that seems most worthy of remark.” And for all of his vindication of Thurman Arnold as the most creative political intellectual of the pre-World War II period, Hofstadter offers another comparison that, unless I am completely projecting, does not come off, in Hofstadter’s own words, as an “an invidious comparison that would, at every point, favor the New Deal.” Hofstadter accurately notes, “The key words of Progressivism were terms like *patriotism, citizen, democracy, law, character, conscience, soul, morals, service, duty, shame, disgrace, sin, and selfishness*...A search for the key words of Arnold’s books yields: *needs, organization, humanitarian, results, technique, institution, realistic, discipline, morale, skill, expert, habits, practical, [and] leadership*.” Am

¹³Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 17, 131, 184.

¹⁴Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 238, 241-42.

I totally off the mark in seeing in Richard Hofstadter, the king of ambiguity, more than a little ambivalence as well?¹⁵

Concluding Reflections

I have spoken much in this paper about my own political tastes and ideological commitments. I have done so self-consciously, however—and very much in the spirit of Richard Hofstadter. Because a major reason that I find it appropriate, and not anachronistic, to evaluate Hofstadter explicitly from the perspective of the present is his own forthright embrace of a tempered presentism. For one thing, Hofstadter consistently recognized his own closeness to the history portrayed in *The Age of Reform*, his very first sentence notes that his subject will be “the age that has just passed.” In the next paragraph Hofstadter gives his reason for writing as “the need for a new analysis from the perspective of our own times.” To be sure, Hofstadter understood what he called “the danger of becoming too present-minded to have a sound sense of historical veracity,” but the saturation of *The Age of Reform* with current political concerns made that little more than a throw-away line. As Daniel Walker Howe and Peter Elliott Finn noted approvingly in 1974, his “awareness of, and concern for, the America of his own day” might well have been “the most important element in Hofstadter’s approach to the past.”¹⁶

Surely a good number of Hofstadter’s mistakes resulted fairly directly from his own political concerns. He could, for example, have avoided so harshly condemning the Populists if he had decided to blame the classes, rather than (or at least alongside) the masses, for the rise of McCarthyism. (Here I am following the superb work of Michael Paul Rogin.) But even Hofstadter’s mistakes were more important, and more productive of important historical and civic discussion, than the pedestrian truths of the mundane empiricists of his day—precisely because they were so engaged. In any event, Hofstadter, properly, never apologized for his presentism. As he

¹⁵Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 315-16, 322, 318. Alan Brinkley comments along these lines: “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.” Brinkley, “Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* Reconsidered,” in *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 149. All of this is not to deny that Hofstadter wrote largely out of a pro-New Deal liberal tradition from at least the 1950s on; indeed, David Brown has uncovered a 1964 address that has Hofstadter “confessing that his critics on the left were correct in describing *The Age of Reform* as a conservative book. It was conceived, he explained, in the satisfied climate of postwar America, and written to defend the policies of the Roosevelt thirties.” Brown, *Hofstadter*, 103.

¹⁶Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 3, 21. Howe and Finn, “Richard Hofstadter,” 10. J. R. Pole appreciatively began his memorial tribute: “Richard Hofstadter wrote history out of a tense, but reflective, engagement with the world of ideas, politics, and people in which he lived.” Pole, “Richard Hofstadter, 1916-1970,” in *Paths to the American Past* (New York, 1979), 335.

remarked in a 1960 interview, "What started me off as an historian was an engagement with contemporary problems." Moreover, the conclusion to his final completed work, *The Progressive Historians*, contains a brilliant meditation on the virtues, and vices, of engaged history that comes down firmly—or at least as firmly as Hofstadter was capable—on the side of "a vital connection between strong public concerns and distinguished historical work." Hofstadter insisted that "present-mindedness, though it has been responsible for major errors, has often brought with it a major access of new insight—bearing error and distortion not in arbitrary solitude but in a kind of fertile if illicit union with intellectual discovery. At their best...interpretive historians have gone to the past with some passionate concern for the future."¹⁷

If, then, we need no other reason to stop apologizing for our own blending of the past and the present, let us use the remarkable model of Richard Hofstadter for that noble purpose.

¹⁷Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); Schlesinger, "Hofstadter," 279; Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (Chicago, 1968), 465. Ian Tyrrell briefly surveys Hofstadter's conflicted attempts to place himself within the political realm in *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago, 2005), 240-43.