

 **Article REVIEW**

Robert D. Johnston. “*The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On.*” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6.2 (April 2007).

Gillis Harp. “Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* and the Crucible of the Fifties.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6.2 (April 2007).

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In the autumn of 2005, in Cambridge, England, the annual meeting of the British American Nineteenth Century Historians featured a session commemorating the half-century anniversary of Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform*. What a splendid idea. Such panels not only honor important books and authors, they also celebrate the achievements of an often-solitary profession that has lost ground in recent years to a burgeoning popular history market. Rather than traffic in nostalgia or pay homage to great “dead” treatises, these occasions offer up the opportunity to reflect on the academy’s most gifted citizens and pay tribute to their talent for saying something both important and well. Even among Clio’s favorites one would be hard pressed to find a more inspiring model than Hofstadter. Among his dozen or so books are a handful of graceful, illuminating gems including *The American Political Tradition* (1948), *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), and *The Progressive Historians* (1968) that are also eminently worthy of reassessment. But one book at a time.

The fruits of the Cambridge forum – recently published essays by Robert D. Johnston (“*The Age of Reform: A Defense of Richard Hofstadter Fifty Years On*”) and Gillis Harp (“*Hofstadter’s The Age of Reform and the Crucible of the Fifties*”) – nicely contextualize Hofstadter and his landmark assessment of the Populist/Progressive movement within the broad currents of postwar political culture. These essays do more than dissect an extant piece of historical literature, they place *The Age of Reform* within a thicket of social and intellectual circumstances that add nuance and texture to its emergence as a critical work. In this case, environment shaped scholarship. Unlike a timeless piece of history – say Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – to understand *The Age of Reform* and the heated professional debates it engendered, one must know something about mid century America and the ascent of postwar liberalism.

On the surface, Richard Hofstadter’s controversialist credentials appear thin. Decked out in a jacket and bow tie blandly accessorized with a crew cut and tortoise rim glasses, he hardly evoked – with the exception of an occasional self-conscious beret – the academic rebel. Too, his professional fortunes – the holder of an endowed chair at an Ivy League

university, co-editor (with C. Vann Woodward) of the prestigious Oxford History of the United States, and a popular public intellectual – argue against any kind of renegade status. He was, as his son Dan recalls, “an old-fashioned gentleman.”¹

When thinking of Hofstadter, I frequently find myself conjoining him with another old fashioned gentleman, Charles Beard. Perhaps it’s the Columbia connection (both took PhDs and taught at Morningside Heights), or the fact that Hofstadter had once confided to an interviewer that “Beard was really *the* exciting influence on me,” or it might be because I consider them the most significant American historians of the twentieth-century.² Whatever the association, Beard has always struck me as much more the fire-bomber of the two. Brought up in a late nineteenth-century Midwest in tension over the capital-labor question, Beard went out of his way as a professional scholar to agitate the powers that be. His (in)famous Progressive manifesto, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), reduced the founders from demi-gods to self interested statesmen; he quit Columbia in a fight over academic freedom; and his final book argued that the recently deceased and much beloved Franklin Roosevelt had deceitfully maneuvered the United States into the Second World War.

The fire inside Beard came from an all out effort to defend the values of a middle-western civilization that had grown into its own following the Civil War and found its historical voice in Frederick Jackson Turner’s elegiac “Frontier Thesis.” No doubt, Beard stood on the losing side of history. Interior, isolationist, and committed to an agrarian-artisan-small scale industrial vision of national life, “Beard’s America” did not survive the American Century. Interestingly, Hofstadter’s scholarship, and in particular *The Age of Reform*, also emerged from a defensive intellectual posture. The book offered a fresh and brilliantly innovative critique of the Populist/Progressive tradition favored by Beard’s generation, and it did so partly as a reaction to the mass democratic movements – principally McCarthyism – that arose in opposition to the New Deal coalition. Conflating the people’s movements of the past with the new Right’s uber anti-communism, Hofstadter sought to point up the more productive and realistic efforts of the late days of the “age of reform” (Roosevelt’s morally neutral, urban, and ethnic friendly programs) by contrasting them with the reform era’s culturally intolerant, prohibitionist, evangelical, anti-Semitic early days. If Beard had spoken for the West, Hofstadter tendered the East’s reply.

Both of the essays under review here are well versed in the primary and secondary literature affiliated with *The Age of Reform*. Johnston’s essay is an outright defense of the book which he believes holds up well despite the intense historiographical scrutiny it underwent in the works of Norman Pollack, Walter Nugent, and Lawrence Goodwyn.

¹ Dan Hofstadter interview with author.

² “Interview: Richard Hofstadter,” by David Hawke, *History* 3 (1960), 138.

Provocatively (and in my mind, correctly), Johnston insists that “Hofstadter . . . did set the correct agenda as we seek the reasons for populism’s twentieth-century rightward trajectory . . . (133) The case, however, was not cinched in *The Age of Reform*. Hofstadter later lightly corrected himself, maintaining in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* that the politics of parochialism and bigotry originated not on the prairie plains in the 1890s (though they were certainly present), but rather accompanied the democratic surge of the Revolutionary and particularly Jacksonian era.

On the controversial issue of agrarian anti-Semitism Johnston sides with Hofstadter. The latter’s brief and too loosely argued discussion of Populist bigotry, he contends, was essentially right (critics be damned!). Caught off guard, none of Populism’s academic defenders really knew what to make of the “Shylock” stereotype that flitted among the farming class other than point out that the East had its share of Jew-baiters too. While some scholars made careers denouncing Hofstadter’s emphasis on the Anti-Semitic side of rural democracy, perhaps the strongest argument for *The Age of Reform’s* enduring interest – and one noted in both essays – is that it moved the historiography of Populism, and more broadly popular movements, from a largely uncritical, economic review of the farmers to one that explored their mood and mentality. This insight alone could stand as a reputation maker *par excellence*, and we are still in its debt.

If Johnston is interested in pointing out *The Age of Reform’s* specific virtues, Harp is more concerned with placing the book within a mid-century East Coast intellectual community’s cagey reaction to mass culture. He notes that Hofstadter’s book hit the stacks within months of both the Army-McCarthy hearings and the release of Jerome Lawrence’s and Robert Lee’s send up of the Scopes Trial, *Inherit the Wind*. These rebukes against demagoguery – the shrill side of anti-communism, the pious political philosophy of William Jennings Bryan – captured the liberal temperament of the times.

Hofstadter’s ideological education began long before this, of course, and Harp is particularly adept at teasing out the European influences – Weber, Mannheim, the Frankfurt School – that informed his thinking. At Columbia, Hofstadter began an intensive study of the social sciences that altered the way he approached the past. His first two books – *Social Darwinism in American Thought* and *The American Political Tradition* – were conventionally if brilliantly conceived projects. They relied primarily on the kinds of primary and secondary source materials long familiar to historians. Harp rightfully observes that any assessment of *The Age of Reform’s* legacy must recognize that it “reveals much about the theoretical and methodological questions historians and other American scholars were grappling with during the fifties.” (147) And make no mistake about it, this is a fifties book. Dated? Yes. Brilliant? Yes. And not a book that its author was completely comfortable with. By the 1960s, the social-psychological categories used by Hofstadter to put the farmers on the Freudian couch seemed less compelling and less useful. Rather than dig in and defend this iconic, Pulitzer Prize winning book, he methodologically moved on. His work still sustained the post war liberalism he thought

essential to combating the far Right and Left, but it reverted back to more conventional approaches – intellectual, political, and economic analyses.

Though sensitive to his critics and their caveats, Hofstadter never recanted the big idea that ran through *The Age of Reform*: contrary to American mythology, popular movements could prove problematic, even dangerous. Certainly the subsequent rise of the Sunbelt Right, followed very soon after by the student movement Left, did nothing to diminish this view. And today? “Values” voters have helped play a major role in sustaining a post sixties politics that might seem very familiar to Hofstadter. Moral posturing has again taken precedence. Fierce debates over abortion, prayer in schools, “culture wars,” and “alternative lifestyles,” careen across the ideological landscape. In this land of eternal redemption, it seems as though Americans are always up for another age of reform.

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<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/076407.html>

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