

Richard Hofstadter, 1916–1970

Richard Hofstadter wrote history out of a tense, but reflective, engagement with the world of ideas, politics and people in which he lived. There was no disjunction between his working and social lives; he carried on with his friends and colleagues an almost ceaseless dialogue that was always serious but often delightfully gay. His intellectual energy was relentless; and, towards the end, his work literally helped to keep him alive. Sometimes he described himself as less a historian than a historical critic, a remark that might, from one of the most influential historians of the age, have seemed ironically self-deprecatory, but was meant as a serious comment on his own historical style.

This style concerned itself primarily with the social history of ideas and their relation to political movements. What he sought to interpret was not the ideas as entities, but the collective mood from which they emerged. He was characteristically engaged, moreover, not only with the past but with its repercussions. He loved the play of mind on mind, but was deeply concerned with the action of past on present, and always wrote history with a sense of his own responsibility for the consequences. He responded to the crises of his generation with the intensity that often seems to impel his work; the mania of the McCarthy era is present by refraction in *The Age of Reform*; and that incomplete *mélange* of brilliant, partly autobiographical reflexions, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, is charged with the tension between populistic democracy and the American intellectual. His preoccupation with historical states of mind sometimes rendered him vulnerable to the findings of archive research, though corrections in points of information or emphasis detracted little from the value of his own original insight. He was early in grasping the significance of problems of social status in American politics, which he saw as marking the leading distinction between the politics of prosperity and those of depression. The theory, which was worked out through his interest in the ideas (rather than the techniques) of certain sociologists, did not provide an exhaustive explanation of the Progressive Movement, but it permanently broadened the dimensions of the sociology of the past. He was better aware of the total complexities of the situation than perhaps were some of his more vigorous critics; and his famous reappraisal of the Populists opens with an appreciative reflexion on their predicament and on their contribution, as well as the 'stress and suffering' from which their thinking emerged.

Hofstadter's literary style was an artistically perfected instrument for the analysis of such complexities. For a writer of such eloquence and power, his prose is surprisingly economical. The subtle rhythm of the sentences and the weighting of short against long are means to convey the content of his thought; and his trenchant ironies are intrinsic to his argument, never attracting attention away from it. Some of his works are full-length interpretative essays, in which his prose carries his argument forward, and the reader with it, as that of a great narrative historian might carry the story of events.

His thought was formed under the influence of the Progressive historians, and it was in keeping with his interests, and with the culturally autobiographical streak in his work, that he should eventually have devoted a book to them. These scholars had emphasized America's historical divisions. In *The American Political Tradition*, as a mild reaction to this emphasis, Hofstadter suggested the value of studying the continuity and consensus in American politics. But he never developed this view into the dogma that it became in other hands; for him it remained a comment, not an interpretation.

The city was Hofstadter's base of observation, psychologically and socially. His mind was informed by the social and cultural riches of New York. He was one of the greatest in a modern urban aristocracy of intellect which has altered the entire perspective for the critique of American culture. With all this, his personal appreciativeness of others was not an additional quality, but an essential element in a singularly complete and harmonious character; it was an attribute of a mind that was able to give so much to his times, and to his students, colleagues and friends. The beneficiaries of all these good things now find themselves hugely alone.

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