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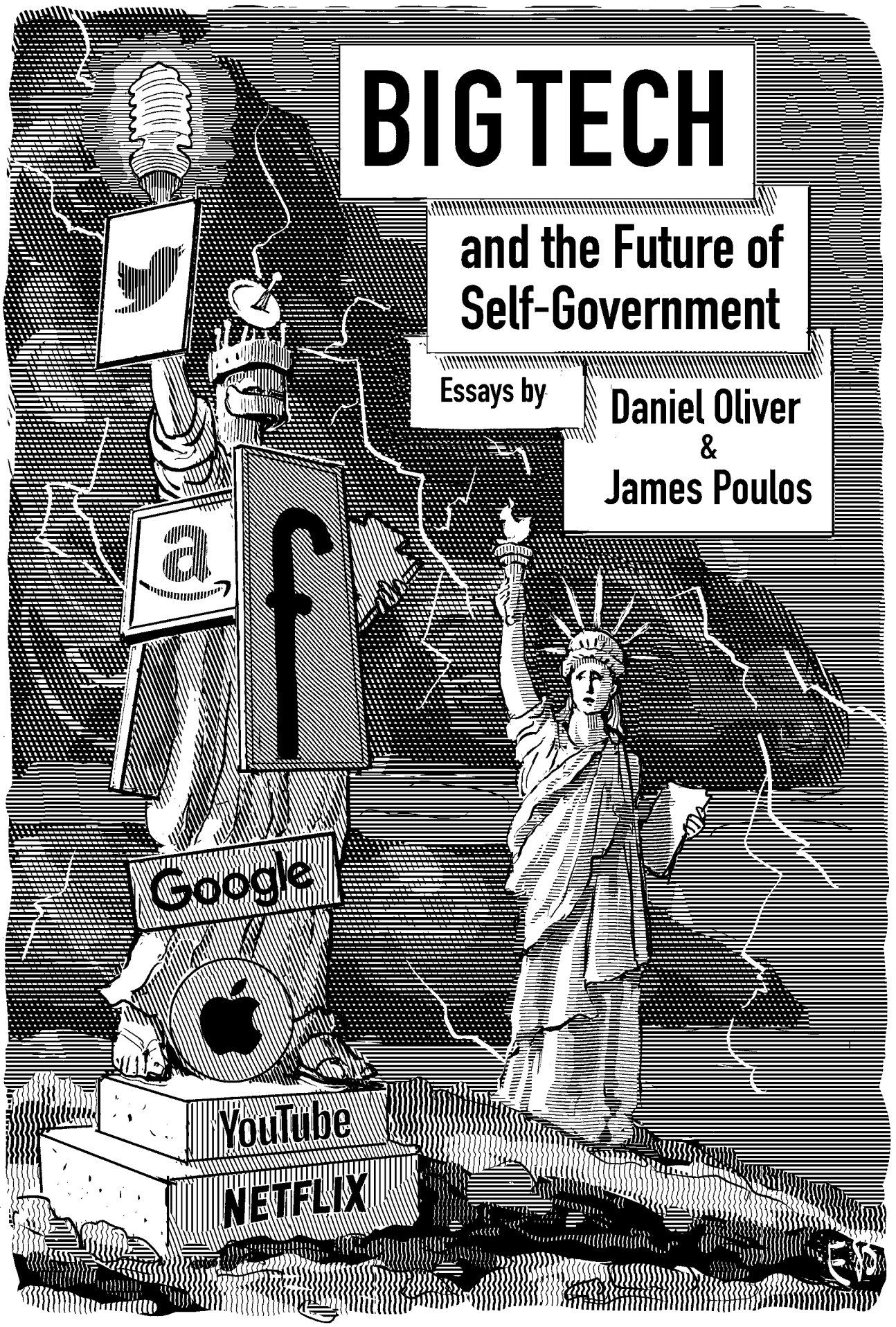
James Bowman: Eminent Boomers

Christopher Caldwell: Robert E. Lee

Robert Royal: Rod Dreher's Survival Guide



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Christopher Flannery: American Westerns

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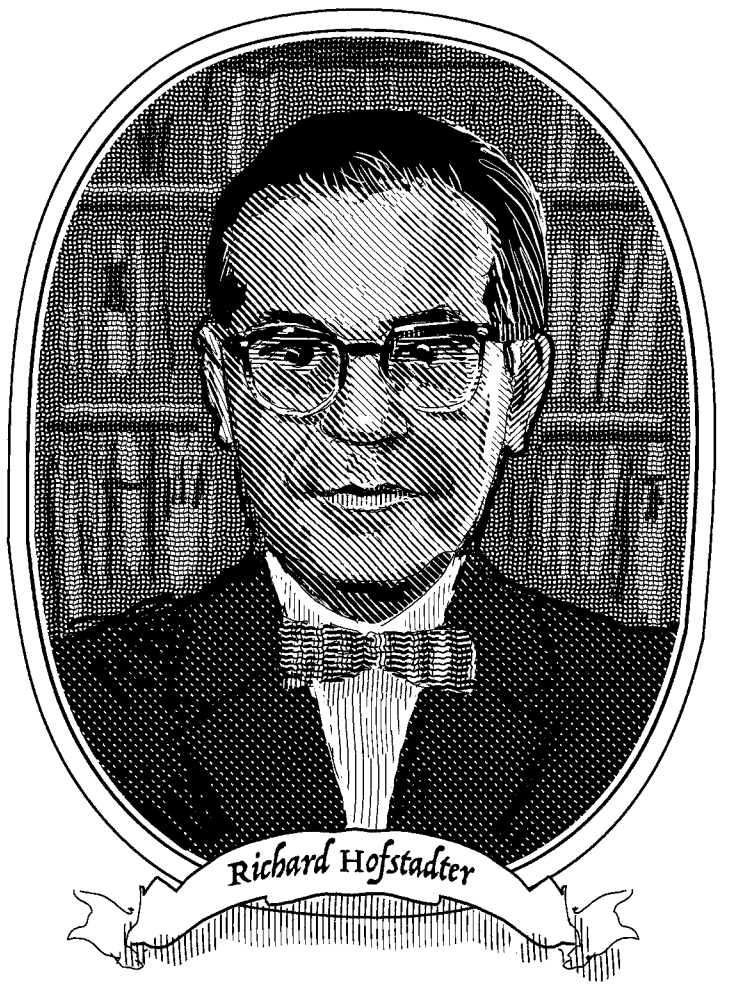
Book Review by Wilfred M. McClay

The Anti-Populist

Richard Hofstadter: Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Uncollected Essays 1956–1965, edited by Sean Wilentz. Library of America, 1,056 pages, $45



Whenever the writings of the historian Richard Hofstadter come up for discussion, the adjective "elegant" also seems always to put in an appearance. And rightly so. It would be hard to think of an important historian of American life whose prose was more consistently appealing and charming, more urbane and literarily accomplished, more pleasing and accessible to the intelligent general reader, and yet at the same time more intellectually sophisticated, than his. It would be even harder to think of anyone active in the field today who compares with him in these respects.

In that regard, he is not only unusual, but seems almost a period piece, a product of a bygone era. When I was a graduate student in history in the 1980s, Hofstadter was still being read here and there, but he was never, ever being held up to us as an example to be imitated. I thought, and still think, this was a shame. We stand in greater need than ever of historians who respect the public enough to write for it, and to it, and not merely for one another. But that is not a quality that has been much encouraged in graduate study during the past three decades.

We probably will not see Hofstadter's like again. His success was partly the product of a special moment, and a set of unusual and unrepeatable circumstances. His name and work are unimaginable apart from the post-war milieu of Columbia University, at a golden moment when the school was, if not quite the cynosure of the intellectual universe, at least home to a remarkable and unmatched collection of scholars and writers in the humanities and social sciences. It was the perfect environment for the flourishing of a certain kind of cool and critical liberalism: skeptical, detached, and as civilized as a dry martini, stirred not shaken. Surrounded by brilliant colleagues such as Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, Peter Gay, Fritz Stern, Franz Neumann, Henry Steele Commager, with neighbors like the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, friends like the omnipresent literary critics Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe, a steady flow of brilliant graduate students, and with New York's journalistic and publishing eminentos friendly and close at hand, Hofstadter could not have asked for a more perfect place to flower.

Although he was reasonably comfortable in the academic world, he was unwilling to be confined to it; and such freedom of movement was easily possible for him in that habitat. Being in New York was different from being in Columbus or Madison, and he naturally gravitated (as his friend Trilling did) toward the sophisticated intellectual journalism of *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, the *New York Re-*

view of Books, the *New Yorker*, and the other little magazines of that scene. Unlike a great many other prominent historians of his time, he remained almost as close to the world of intellectual journalism as he was to the historical profession. And yet he always kept practical politics at arm's length, unlike his thoroughly activist friend Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., whose political side caused him to evolve into a court historian for the Kennedy family. Hofstadter valued his historian's stance of skeptical detachment too much to risk putting his talents in service to some political person or cause.

Of course, it goes without saying that not all historians have admired Hofstadter. Historians tend to be a fractious bunch anyway. But his detractors have had their reasons to reserve judgment about him. His work generally involved the interpretation of published sources and the critical analysis and synthesis of other historians' work, rather than the hard and often inelegant tasks of digging out fresh discoveries through extensive archival research—the sort of work that makes far more challenging the task of hammering the final product into fine and limpid prose. While there is an obvious need for both kinds of historiography, the practitioners of the one tend to look down upon the practitioners of the other.

And yet his influence has been enormous. In a career cut tragically short by leukemia, which took his life in 1970 at the much-too-young age of 54, he produced a whole shelf of important books, two of which won Pulitzer Prizes: *The Age of Reform* (1955), his examination of Populism, Progressivism, and other precursors to the New Deal; and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), which argued that America evinced a long and unfortunate (and often ugly) pattern of hostility to the application of disciplined intellect and expert knowledge for the solution of social problems and improvement of life. Among his other important works were his first book, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), which was followed by his most widely read book, the irony-inflected *American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948), plus *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), *The Progressive Historians* (1968), *The Idea of a Party System* (1969), and the posthumous *America at 1750* (1971).

It is entirely fitting that a historian of such productivity, influence, and literary distinction should have a Library of America volume devoted to him. And yet, one sympathizes with the task faced by the book's editor, the distinguished Princeton historian Sean Wilentz, of how to select from this sprawling oeuvre in such a way as to render the man as fully as possible. The selection Wilentz settled on included two books in their entirety, *Anti-Intellectualism* and *Paranoid Style*, along with twelve uncollected essays on topics such as the founders, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Darwinism, and three unpublished essays. Weighing in at just under a thousand pages of selections, it's quite a substantial amount of Hofstadter. All of it is worth reading. But there are omissions that matter a great deal.

One quickly notices certain leitmotivs and characteristic themes emerging in this selection of writings. The urbanity and grace and skeptical wit are all there. The critical edge is there. But so too are some far less attractive qualities, aspects of Hofstadter's work that, for better or worse, represent a distinctive and enduring part of his legacy. Chief among these is his emphasis upon the psychological sources of political ideas and speech, and upon Americans' propensity for stubborn and incorrigible irrationality as a persistent weakness in their national life.

> Hofstadter's thinking had already been shifting away from the ironic tone of the books that had won him prizes, toward something far profounder.

Anti-Intellectualism was a lengthy account of all the ways, often appalling or comical, in which American life has resisted the call of reason, the blessings of higher education, and the imperatives of expert knowledge, in favor of indulgence in wild forms of populism, religious zealotry, demagoguery, and conspiracy theorizing. *Paranoid Style* went even further, identifying the outsized role in American life of angry, resentful outsiders whose conceptualization of the political world derived from, or at least was reinforced by, their psychological problems. That "even paranoids might have real enemies," to adapt Delmore Schwartz's famous formulation, became beside the point.

In these works, as well as in *The Age of Reform*, where he explored the concept of "status anxiety" as an explanation for the defects of Progressivism, Hofstadter associated himself with a highly negative view of the Populist movement in 19th-century America, and of the populist and broadly democratic movements more generally. He was not alone in this; it was a view held by a great many historians and social scientists in the post-war years, many of them influenced by the writings of Theodor Adorno and other émigré writers who located the sources of Nazism in the psychological disorder of the German bourgeois family and the pathologies of mass society. When sociologist Daniel Bell published his 1955 collection, *The New American Right*, which sought to explain the rise of McCarthyism in terms of certain groups' resentment over their loss of social status, it prominently featured Hofstadter's essay on the rise of what he called "pseudo-conservatism."

Anti-Intellectualism was a hit with the literary intellectuals and the *bien-pensants* of the educated classes, but it was poorly received by many of his fellow historians, as historian David Brown documents in his sympathetic but admirably honest *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (2006). Writing in a private letter, C. Vann Woodward was apoplectic over Hofstadter's dismissive treatment of religious fundamentalists as "millennial, apocalyptic, puritanical, cynical, nationalist, quasi-fascist, anti-foreign, anti-Semitic, anti-statist, anti-Communist, anti-liberal." As he upbraided his colleague and friend, "Dick, you just can't do this. No amount of Adorno, Stouffer, Hartley, etc., will sustain it." Kenneth Lynn, writing in the *Reporter*, argued that Hofstadter's manner of going after "populist democracy, the business mentality, and evangelical Protestantism" was little more than a form of "elitism on the left," a rehash of previous gibes against "Bryanism, Babbittry, and the Bible Belt." Daniel Boorstin rejected the claim that intellectuals were cruelly marginalized in modern America as a self-indulgent fantasy, and pointed out that intellectuals were becoming a powerful group, "welcomed in industry and in government" as never before. Perhaps the status anxiety was in the eyes of the beholder?

It is not a coincidence that the concept of the "paranoid style" emerged in the public eye during the 1964 presidential election, the campaign in which Barry Goldwater's slogan "In your heart you know he's right" was countered by his Democratic opposition with "In your guts you know he's nuts." Hofstadter contributed his bit to the political cause by publishing his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" in *Harpers* magazine in October, just before the election. No American writer did more than Hofstadter to legitimize this reductive and *ad hominem* way of thinking about politics, now so commonplace, of presuming to analyze speakers

or writers by focusing on their alleged psychological state, rather than attending to the substance of his or her policies or arguments. In his hands psycho-slander became legitimate, even highbrow, particularly if the target identified politically with something other than liberal cosmopolitanism.

So Hofstadter had a dark side, one that gets a full exposure in this volume. Christopher Lasch insisted that Hofstadter "could not conceal his disdain for the hopelessly muddled thinking of ordinary Americans," and that he resembled in that respect the idol of his undergraduate years, H.L. Mencken, the great nemesis of the "booboisie." So how then did it come about that the historian John Higham—a generous and judicious man, as I can attest—called Hofstadter "the finest and most humane intelligence of our generation"? How are we to reconcile such elevated and generous qualities of character with the detached, ironic, superior, and often smirking view Hofstadter brought to so much of his subject matter?

The answer is that the pathologist was not all there was to Hofstadter. Indeed, there is another aspect to him that is only faintly reflected in the Library of America selection. And that was the fact that he changed over the course of his professional life, and rather dramatically so in his last years. He did so in ways that we can find instructive, and (I would even say) admirable. The evidence of it is in plain sight, in the changing character of his last works.

The catalyst for change was the cultural revolution of the 1960s, for which Hofstadter had very little patience, and for which, by the time the signal year of 1968 arrived, he had come to feel naked disgust. "The Age of Garbage," he labeled the era, with dismissive contempt. When the *New York Review of Books* came out with a cover article by Andrew Kopkind about how to make a Molotov cocktail, he declared that he would never write for them again.

Yet when the Columbia University "bust" came in April 1968, and student protesters shut down much of the university, Hofstadter was asked to perform an important act of conciliation and institutional healing: delivering that year's commencement address, in place of the university's president, who would normally have done the job but who was too much at the center of the whirlwind of controversy. Hofstadter was sympathetic to some of the protestors' concerns, but not to their methods, and was thus in a position to speak to, and for, all parties. If he could find the words to do so.

The speech, which was delivered off campus at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, was an eloquent defense of the idea of the university, against those who would disparage or destroy it, whether out of carelessness or malice or nihilism. That commencement speech ought to have been included in this volume. Its contents were both timely and timeless. It could be applied almost without alteration to the present moment, in which the very idea of the university is once again slipping away from us, this time without much defense even from our universities' leaders. It may not survive without a renewed sense of its purpose, and the will to make that sense prevail.

Let me quote just two passages from Hofstadter's address, to give a sense of its relevance to our present moment:

> A university is a community, but it is a community of a special kind—a community devoted to inquiry.... Its presence marks our commitment to the idea that somewhere in society there must be an organization in which anything can be studied or questioned—not merely safe and established things but difficult and inflammatory things, the most troublesome questions of politics and war, of sex and morals, of property and national loyalty.

On the difficult but necessary discipline of academic freedom:

> The ideal of academic freedom does indeed put extraordinary demands upon human restraint and upon our capacity for disinterested thought. Yet these demands are really of the same general order as those we regard as essential to any advanced civilization. The very possibility of civilized human discourse rests upon the willingness of people to consider that they may be mistaken. The possibility of modern democracy rests upon the willingness of governments to accept the existence of a loyal opposition, organized to reverse some of their policies and to replace them in office.

Such sentiments were not a one-off meant to satisfy the ceremonial requirements of a tense and difficult moment. And, for all that the "bust" was clearly a shock and a wake-up call for Hofstadter, and a reminder of the preciousness and fragility of the institutions that make inquiry and civilized human discourse possible, his thinking had already been shifting away from the ironic tone of the books that had won him prizes, toward something far profounder.

Because of this shift, *The Progressive Historians* would be his best book, a masterpiece of reflective and introspective scholarship in which he came to a critical reckoning with the progressive historiographical notions that had shaped his outlook, and that of the discipline. "The very possibility of civilized human discourse," he had said at John the Divine, "rests upon the willingness of people to consider that they may be mistaken," an insight that he was in effect applying to himself, concluding the book with the insight that history was not merely to aid in the achievement of political ends, but to be "the most humanizing among the arts."

And in the underappreciated *Idea of a Party System* he defended the institutional structures of pluralism established by the Constitution as the indispensable safeguards for the existence of any "loyal opposition," for the equivalent dignity of both sides of any great public debate—a system also built around the humble principle that it is permissible to be mistaken. It would do the discourse of our politics, and our campuses, immeasurable good, were we to rediscover and adopt that principle. Though doing so is going to require something more than humility from our leaders. They can begin by reading and inwardly digesting Richard Hofstadter's 1968 commencement address, which they can easily find on the internet, though regrettably not in this volume.

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