



The Age of Reform

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This book is a landmark in American political thought. It examines the passion for progress and reform that colored the entire period from 1890 to 1940 -- with startling and stimulating results. It searches out the moral and emotional motives of the reformers the myths and dreams in which they believed, and the realities with which they had to compromise.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

The Age of Reform Details

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From Reader Review The Age of Reform for online ebook

David Monroe says

Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize-winning book introduced his idea of "status politics" -- the idea that people don't act from economic self-interest but from a desire to preserve their social standing. He portrayed the late-nineteenth-century Populists as moved by fears of modernity, nostalgia for an agrarian past, and bigotry. Over the years, historians have poked holes in it. Hofstadter overstated the Populists' nativism and glossed over their critiques of Gilded Age capitalism. The book is still a good point of departure for anyone interested in the Populist Period of 1890 to 1940.

Katie Hanna says

I'm too exhausted to explain why I don't entirely endorse this book right at the moment. Suffice it to say that I've long argued that Hofstadter has a pretty strong anti-immigrant bias, and *Age of Reform* did nothing to change my opinion.

Ellen says

This book deeply altered the way academia thought about and wrote history. Aside from the topical content, Hofstadter incisively examined the language of there-to-fore American politics. Particularly, the inherent and inescapable discursive ambiguity. It's a masterpiece.

Mark Bowles says

A. Synopsis: From 1890 to WWII is the "Age of Reform." The intent is to show the differences between the Populist-Progressive reforms (which forms the core of the book) and the New Deal reforms. This book does not focus on the politics, or the legislation of these movements. Instead, the main theme is an examination of the ideas of the participants, the conception of their own work and the place it would occupy in history. Hofstadter finds these ideas in popular culture--journalists, publicists, popular magazines, muckracking articles.

B. Three main reform movements: Populism, Progressivism, and New Deal

1. The agrarian uprising that found its expression through Populism in the 1890s and the Bryan campaign in 1896. Populism includes the Populist party of the 1890s, Greenback, Granger, and anti-monopoly movements.

2. The Progressive movement from 1900 to 1914. Progressivism includes the Republican insurgents who supported T. Roosevelt in 1912, but also a broader impulse toward criticism and change through social and economic reform. Its general theme was to restore economic individualism and political democracy which was believed to be destroyed by the corruption of the political machine.

3. The New Deal of the 1930s

C. Circumstances surrounding the rise of Populism and Progressivism

1. For Populism, the function of the farmer was considered preeminent because he fed all the others.

2. A breakdown in the homogeneity of Yankee, Protestant America. The rise of industry brought an immigrant invasion. Two political ethics arose from the clash between immigrants and natives: moral leaders of Protestant social reform and the personal emphasis on family by the immigrant masses. The struggles of the Progressive era were influenced by the conflict between these two codes.

D. The agrarian myth and commercial realities

1. The myth includes the yeoman farmer (the simple, honest, independent man) as the hero. Idealized rural life. There was a real contrast between the verbal deference everyone paid to the farmer and the farmers actual economic and social position. The growth of an urban market increased an antagonism between the farmer and the urban middle and upper classes. The farmer wanted the goods that were available in the city. 2. The agrarian myth was actually false. Between 1815 and 1860 the character of American agriculture was transformed. The independent yeoman began to disappear due to the rise of commercial agriculture.

Commercial agriculture displaced any truth that the agrarian myth might have had. The true product of American rural society was a “harassed little country businessman” who worked very hard.

3. The American farmer had a dual nature which allows us one way to view the agrarian movements. The Populist rhetoric and the indulgent view of the farmers revolt was due to the “soft” side of the farmers existence--agrarian ideology or life on the Frontier. The other side was the “hard” side which included the business practices and commercial opportunities. Hofstadter rejects that Populism grew out of this Frontier mentality. Instead, he claims that Populism can be understood, not as a “product of frontier inheritance, but as another episode in the well-established tradition of American entrepreneurial radicalism.” (58)

E. The folklore of Populism

1. Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common well-being of its people. The dominant themes of the Populist ideology (the “soft” side of agrarianism) were: the idea of a golden age; the concept of natural harmony of interests among the productive classes; the dualistic version of social struggles; the conspiracy theory of history (all history since the Civil War was a conspiracy of the international money power); and the doctrine of the primacy of money.

2. The industrial world prevented these agrarian ideas from existing

F. From pathos to parity

1. Paradox: The failure of the agrarian revolt of the 1890s has been described as the final defeat of the American farmer. But, there is evidence of the long-range power of Populism and its influence on the Progressive era.

2. Hofstadter claims that the “soft” side of the agrarian revolt failed, yet the “hard” side (based upon the commercial realities of agriculture) developed more prosperously than ever.

3. The attempt to make agrarianism into a mass movement (a 3rd party) had to be replaced by modern methods of pressure politics and lobbying.

G. The status revolution and Progressive leaders

1. Populism was rural and provincial. Progressivism was urban and nationwide, led by the middle classes who took over the protest and leadership.

2. After 1900 Populism and Progressivism merge. Progressivism was influenced by its Populist inheritance of reform and a deep concern about urban life.

3. Hofstadter’s thesis is that men became Progressives “not because of economic deprivations but primarily because they were victims of an upheaval in status that took place in the US during the closing decades of the 19th and the early years of the 20th. (135)” Prior to 1870 the middle classes could still command power. But, the rise in wealth of the industrialists dwarfed them in comparison. The Progressive middle class felt overshadowed and fought back.

H. The Progressive impulse

1. To an extraordinary degree, the work of the Progressive movement rested upon its journalism, its muckraking (the “revolution in journalism”). It exposed the corrupt nature of government

I. From Progressivism to the New Deal

1. The New Deal was essentially different and discontinuous from the Progressive era. It was different because its central problem was unlike the problems of Progressivism. When T. Roosevelt took office in 1901 the country was 3 years past an economic depression and was in a period of healthy economic development. When FDR took office the entire American economic system was failing.

J. Image

1. Two farmers: A “soft” one in the fields represents Populism (golden age, harmony, conspiracy); A “hard” one in the middle of a big city represents Progressivism (a middle class person concerned with urban life). A giant Rockefeller steps on him which represents the status revolution.

Robert Owen says

In the Pulitzer Prize winning “The Age of Reform”, Richard Hofstadter chronicles the flow of social and political currents that propelled the Populist, Progressive and New Deal reform movements that swept America from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th. Hofstadter’s goal is to articulate the motivations, ideologies and tactics that fueled each of these movements, and so account for their achievements, failures and relative impact (or lack of impact) on subsequent trends in American history.

Leaving the who-did-what-when chronology of events to other writers, Hofstadter seeks to understand these reform movements from the perspective of the people who embraced them. Although each movement fits broadly into the overarching category of “reform”, the actors who rose to propel their movements were, in each case, very different types of people who were motivated by very different sorts of concerns and approached their efforts at change from correspondingly different perspectives. Hofstadter examines each of these in turn, producing a tightly bound work that is as thought provoking as it is insightful.

Hofstadter’s core insight regarding status interests and the degree to which they impact political movements runs in the background of his explorations of the three reform movements of the era. Populism, with its demands for land reform and agricultural supports, was an agrarian movement whose driving forces Hofstadter attributes to the sense the nation’s farming class had that they and their interests were being eclipsed by the forces of the industrial revolution and, in particular, the dirty, noisy, immoral, immigrant-ridden urban centers industrialization produced. Progressivism, seeking to end the stranglehold of trusts and the reform of anti-democratic machine-driven political hierarchies, arose out of a sense by the middle-class and professions that opportunities that should have been made available to them as the just deserts of their industry and hard work were instead being horded by entitled, undeserving “money men” and corrupt, patronage dispensing political bosses. Whereas Populism and Progressivism produced far more moralizing philosophy than they did actual results, New Dealers were responding to the panicked terror of the Great Depression and made reform actually happen with little regard for or interest in the philosophical basis for their actions. This emphasis on status interests not only makes the history of these eras comprehensible, but also provides thought-provoking frameworks by which contemporary political movements such as the Tea Party can be understood and evaluated.

On a stylistic note, the more I read the more I find myself drawn to the writings of 50’s era thinkers like Hofstadter. Separate and apart from the ideas he presents, it’s the way he presents them that appeals to me. Sparse, yet rich in content, witty, yet never buffoonish, the ideas are nested in compact frameworks of reason that one is compelled to unpack in order to understand what the writer is on about.

The book was remarkable, and makes me regret the previous five starts that I’ve awarded to other efforts in

that they now compel me to offer six stars to Hofstadter.

Lauren Albert says

Populism, Progressivism and the New Deal. Hofstadter draws out the differences between them as well as between the cultures and mindsets that generated them. It was a little dry at times (hence the "3") but I learned a lot--since I took tons of notes, I'm sure of that!

Joseph Stieb says

Once again, Richard Hofstadter proves himself to be one of the best illuminators of American political history I've ever read. This book covers mainly populism and progressivism, but it isn't about the movements' actions so much as the ideas, mythologies, and social conflicts that motivated them to push for reform. Overall, he sees both movements emerging from the profound anxiety of the rapid transition from an agrarian society to an industrial, urban one. There are dozens of eye-opening points in here, so I'll just note a few that stood out to me.

Both movements emerged from a deep trend of moralism in American politics. The industrial, capitalist, urban world seemed so impersonal, and its competitive ethos did not always reward the most scrupulous, public-minded, honest men. The New Deal, in contrast, tended to be pragmatic, results-oriented, and far less Manichean in its worldview. For example, the Progressive loathed machine politics, but the New Dealer were willing to co-opt them to ameliorate the Depression's effects. He emphasizes that this moralism could often conflict with liberalism, as the anti-immigrant sentiment of many Progressives and the racism of the Populists often attested. He finds that the Populists were motivated by the "agrarian myth," or the long-standing American love affair with the independent yeoman-farmer citizen. Part of the crisis of Populism was that this model of agriculture was simple unsuitable for large-scale, mechanized farming and was therefore dying out. Progressivism also longed for the agrarian myth, but it was based even more in the anxieties of the old "Mugwump" elite in the rise of what they viewed as a crass, selfish, not service-minded set of new money industrialists. These people had clearly become more powerful by the turn of the century, but the teachers, professors, lawyers, doctors, mid-level businessmen, and other respectable bourgeois tradesmen were not ready to accept this nor to tolerate the downsides of industrialism and urbanism. These old gentry folk believed more in the republican virtues of the Founders: men should serve their communities/nation, act with humility and propriety rather than ostentation, and focus on self-improvement and virtuous living rather than the pursuit of riches. The resulting Progressive movement was highly moralistic, set both on helping and reforming the common worker (temperance, education, charity, Hull House, assimilating immigrants) and assaulting the power of the industrialists (trust-busting, some labor reform, direct election of senators). Progressivism was far more moderate than Populism. It did not seek to transform, but the reform the system and partially allocate its wealth more fairly. One of the great successes of Progressivism was to curb some of America's worst tendencies without killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. They also intended, and probably succeeded, in pre-empting more radical solutions to America's ills. In sum, a major takeaway from this book is that moral views almost always underpin people's political leanings, their sense of what is wrong with society, and their plans for reform. Figuring out those underlying views is crucial to understanding these kinds of movements.

One interesting note about Populism is that it did succeed in improving the lot of farmers, just not for the majority of farmers. During the economic downturn for agriculture in the late 1900s, the number of farmers shrank even as the trade expanded. These farmers remaining farmers were now far more industrialized, cohesive, vocal, and capitalistic. They also had way more sway in state and federal government, especially in the upper houses where representation is not proportional to population. A cabal of senators from agrarian states and districts created a powerful voting bloc that fed benefits back to the remaining farmers (still kinda works this way). The long-term effect was for farmers to essentially leave the labor movement and become conservative businessmen. The new agrarian labor struggle became the fight between capitalistic farmers and wage/seasonal laborers.

These movements also brought about historic shifts in people's relationship to the government. Both movements, and the New Deal especially, featured ordinary citizens calling on the federal and state governments to attack the problems created by industrialism and take on some responsibility for the common good.

Hofstadter's brief comments on WWI are awesome. He argues that WWI was sold largely on Progressive terms. The US may have had good business and strategic reasons for staying out (or going in, depending upon one's views), but the debate and major appeals centered around ethical, Progressive language. For example, Wilson ultimately sold the US on international law, freedom of the seas, the rights of small nations and minorities, the fight against autocracy and militarism, and the quest to extend democracy. Like the Progressive to the poor and wayward rich, the US had a responsibility to reform the world. This notion of responsibility still lies heavy upon the American conscience vis a vis the rest of the planet.

In sum, this is a brilliant work of political history and social psychology. Progressives, for example, were seeking not just to change their society but, less consciously, to restore their own importance in society and have some catharsis about its greatest excesses. Broadly, there is an anxiety in both movements about the broad trend away from personal societies to impersonal systems, a challenge we still face today. Hofstadter teaches us about the movements themselves, their achievements and failings, but even more so about their animating myths and ideologies. It is an illuminating way to be studying 20th Century American politics, and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in this topic.

J. Dunn says

A critical and contextual look at the Populist and Progressive movements in American politics; where they succeeded and failed, what forces shaped them and what their legacy was. Good background into a movement that I view as a big part of my political legacy. It has definitely removed any rose-colored view of them I might have had, but I'm still left with the lasting and important message that they accomplished a lot of worthwhile social and political change with minimal chaos and violence, whatever their faults may have been. This basically re-affirms why I identify as a Progressive to begin with.

Michael says

Love him or hate him, you just can't get around him. Hofstadter takes up a strong (and contested) position on the Populists, as already addressed in Week 2. He argues more extensively in this chapter that the irony of Populism is that, though they may have gone down to political defeat, they achieved most of their goals by the very fact that most of their causes became law. In the classic role of the third party, they were like bees, "once they have stung, they die" (pp. 97 and 108- 89).

Many would contest the idea that Populism was so very successful. Particularly Lawrence Goodwyn, but that will have to wait. Many too would contest Hofstadter's emphasis on the "success-hungriness" of the Populist leadership. As he did with Abraham Lincoln in *The American Political Tradition*, so he does with the Populist leaders such as General Weaver (p. 105). Ambition, not ideals, drive Hofstadter's Populists. Turning to free silver as the definitive issue, these ambitious leaders essentially sold out the movement for their own moment.

In sections entitled "The Golden Age and After" and "The Vanishing Hayseed" he traces what happened to the farmers' movement after the end of Populism. Despite the sentimental lament for a lost agrarian past, the farmers have done quite well in 20th century America. The farmers who had once been populists became the agribusiness bloc, and at the time of writing (1956) "industrial America goes on producing the social, surpluses out of which the commercial farmers are subsidized" (p. 120).¹ One more irony of populism too. As the "hayseed" vanished, so too did the farmer's association with the laboring man. Taking up an increasingly conservative position, "the tone of the farmer's movement was completely transformed" and agribusiness was far more likely to support management than strikers (p. 123). In the end, the farmers' rebellion was turned into its opposite.

Erik Graff says

This book was required reading for Mr. Ellenberger's required U.S. Government course at Maine Township High School South.

I was the class commie, having discovered that the application of a Marxist, dialectical analysis to history was productive not only of meaningful retellings of events but also of good grades for essays and research papers.

Matt says

I first read Richard Hofstadter as a graduate student in classes where we mostly did what we could to poke holes in his colorful, sweeping histories. But I return to Hofstadter because while his scholarship has never gone away, he is undoubtedly deserving of a moment of reconsideration in the current political climate. Hofstadter differed from his mid-century contemporaries in that he emphasized an anti-intellectual strain in the frontier mentality of America, and in this volume, of the anti-urban, anti-immigrant, nativist, Protestant ethos in populist movements a century ago. In short, Hofstadter may not have raised an eyebrow at the Tea Party movement or the rise of Trump. At the very least, he would have recognized it.

The Age of Reform focuses on two periods in American history, the Populist era (1890s) and the Progressive

era (1900-1914). Historians have a positive view of many of the reforms of that period, since it ushered in substantial democratic reforms, including direct election of Senators, the initiative and referendum, secret ballots. While Hofstadter acknowledges the positive side of those and other reforms, his nuanced spin attaches the mentality of those developments to a nostalgia for the past, an effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was believed to have existed in earlier America, destroyed by industrialization and political machines. There was a need to bring back "a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost". Hofstadter's intellectual contribution, it seems, was the emphasis on this myth of the self-made rural man. "The American mind was raised upon a sentimental attachment to rural living and upon a series of notions about rural people and rural life that I have chosen to designate as the agrarian myth. ... Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen."

"Much is said in our political discussions about the big-city machines and their role in politics. It is testimony to the grip of our agrarian traditions that relatively little attention is paid by the public to the exorbitant power of rural blocs."

In short, Hofstadter's focus here is on that rural bloc, and what makes this book an interesting contemporary read is that the fault lines in American politics a century later are similarly pronounced.

Hofstadter is not terribly flattering of Americans' views on race:

"The conspiratorial theory and the associated Anglophobic and Judophobic feelings were part of a larger complex of fear and suspicion of the stranger that haunted, and still tragically haunts, the nativist American mind. ... Everyone remote and alien was distrusted and hated – even Americans if they happened to be city people."

Similarly, Hofstadter on culture:

"To the rural migrant, raised in respectable quietude and the high-toned moral imperatives of evangelical Protestantism, the city seemed not merely a new social form or way of life but a strange threat to civilization itself."

"The city was symbolized as the home of loan sharks, dandies, fops, and aristocrats with European ideas who despised farmers as hayseeds."

"Whereas a century ago the American farmer was inclined to concentrate his suspicion of the city upon the wealthy and aristocratic, he now tends more and more to look upon the idleness of the unemployed and the tactics of industrial unions as the most prominent symbols of urban corruption."

Hofstadter on the media:

"What was new in muckraking in the Progressive era was neither its ideas nor its existence, but its reach – its nationwide character and its capacity to draw nationwide attention, the presence of mass muckraking media with national circulations."

"It was on jingoist issues that the Populist and Bryanite sections of the country, with the aid of the yellow press and many political leaders, achieved that rapport with the masses."

"When conspiracies do not exist it is necessary for those who think in this fashion to invent them."

Hofstadter also writes extensively about opposition to political machines and those that tangibly benefited in such a way that jibes with today's opposition to welfare programs.

I hate to draw too strong of a parallel, but I really picked this book expecting to find similarities between his depiction of turn-of-the-century populist attitudes and contemporary analyses of Republican voters. And they were not too hard to find.

Hofstadter is taken to task by contemporary scholars for being overblown, but the depth of this volume is impressive. The book was popular enough to earn him a Pulitzer. Hofstadter himself came from a household of immigrants, and he was a member of that east coast class of intellectual elites. He was both Jewish and urban as well, and he was writing this book in response to a society and a profession that would have been biased against this particular spin.

Megan says

I had to read this book for my seminar on the progressive and populist movement in America. I already do not like having to read for class and to make it even worse the book is non-fiction which is one of my least favorite things to read because they tend to be so dry. This book proved my bete noir about non-fiction to be true. I sort of get what the author was trying to do by splitting up the movements into two different things and then discussing how each group of people were affected by these movements and how most of them felt about it. But to be honest it took supplementary readings for me to really wrap my head around this book. Probably also did not help that when it comes to the populist and progressive movements I am basically a blank slate. I have not a clue as to what it was about or when it started or who it involved. I learned some of the basics from this book but I did not really get a good look into the hearts of these two movements. This is one of those books that after about five pages your brain is numb and you cannot comprehend and thing you have just read. I read the entire thing and can honestly say that I do not have an entire picture of what happened. I now must go write a one page discovery page about this book. Here is hoping that turns out okay.

Graeme Roberts says

This mighty work covers American political history from Populism in the 1890s, to Progressivism in the early twentieth century, and the New Deal in the 30s. I loved that Richard Hofstadter concluded that making change and trying things out was always vastly more effective than developing principles and ideologies. The principles of Populism and Progressivism just wormed their way into popular consciousness and became law, often at the hands of the very politicians who had earlier opposed them. And Franklin Delano Roosevelt focused on fixing the country and helping people with the New Deal while ideologues foamed at the mouth in ways that make Trump opponents seem mild. In politics as in life, evolution is the messy business of experimenting and seeing what works.

Here are a couple of excerpts to make your brain boil and your heart sing:

In the post-Civil War period all this was changed. The rapid development of the big cities, the building of a great industrial plant, the construction of the railroads, the emergence of the corporation as the dominant form of enterprise, transformed the old society and revolutionized

the distribution of power and prestige. . . .

The newly rich, the grandiosely or corruptly rich, the masters of great corporations, were bypassing the men of the Mugwump type—the old gentry, the merchants of long standing, the small manufacturers, the established professional men, the civic leaders of an earlier era. In a score of cities and hundreds of towns, particularly in the East but also in the nation at large, the old-family, college-educated class that had deep ancestral roots in local communities and often owned family businesses, that had traditions of political leadership, belonged to the patriotic societies and the best clubs, staffed the governing boards of philanthropic and cultural institutions, and led the movements for civic betterment, were being overshadowed and edged aside in the making of basic political and economic decisions. In their personal careers, as in their community activities, they found themselves checked, hampered, and overridden by the agents of the new corporations, the corrupters of legislatures, the buyers of franchises, the allies of the political bosses. In this uneven struggle they found themselves limited by their own scruples, their regard for reputation, their social standing itself. To be sure, the America they knew did not lack opportunities, but it did seem to lack opportunities of the highest sort for men of the highest standards. In a strictly economic sense these men were not growing poorer as a class, but their wealth and power were being dwarfed by comparison with the new eminences of wealth and power. They were less important, and they knew it.

Grab this book if you can find it. It has far too many footnotes that consume far too much space, but you must suck that up and exult in your new knowledge.

Nils says

What a fantastic re-read. Hofstadter's take on both the populists and progressives is wildly out of fashion, but the power and clarity of his liberal vision of a proper democratic politics remains undimmed.

Steven Peterson says

Richard Hofstadter was a fine, well respected historian. This book is an excellent analysis of what he terms "the age of reform." The book traces efforts at reform from 1890 to the second world war. Sometimes efforts at reform were held back, but there was an arc, according to the author, over time. Among subjects explored: populism, progressivism, to the New Deal. All in all, a good exploration of the era.
