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SYMPOSIUM: RICHARD HOFSTADTER AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION

The Tradition Industry: Hofstadter and Santayana on Politics, Culture and Capitalism

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Abstract
Richard Hofstadter's provocative interpretation of what he called The American Political Tradition has long interested students and scholars. Often read as a response to the crisis times of the depression 1930s and interventionist 1940s, the book's origins are actually rooted in deeper cultural changes in the United States. This paper argues that George Santayana's earlier essay, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911), anticipated several key aspects of Hofstadter's argument and proved to more accurately foresee the ideological course of twentieth century American politics.

Keywords Hofstadter · Santayana · Liberalism · Political tradition · Historiography · Consensus · Capitalism

Richard Hofstadter's lively, ironic reading of what he called *The American Political Tradition* continues to cast a long historiographical shadow, highlighting the break between the last century's pre and post war liberalism. The former, he famously observed, embraced agrarianism, isolationism, and unreflective capitalism, ideologies apparently rendered irrelevant in the dawning day of the New Deal State. By identifying a core set of common values – "consensus" – Hofstadter had presumably pioneered a fresh approach to thinking about the country's political culture. And yet the novelty of his "discovery" is doubtful. Nearly forty years before Hofstadter's musing on the problem of America's "traditions," the philosopher George Santayana had advanced a similar argument. In his classic 1911 address, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," Santayana had challenged the ruling sense of religion, politics, morals, and manners long passed down from generation to generation. Both scholars produced grand narratives, in other words, that were sensitive to the coming eclipse of the old order.

It is perhaps worth noting that Santayana and Hofstadter were "outsider-insiders" – ethnic minorities, that is, living in America. Santayana's mother, Josefina Borrás y Carbonell (daughter of a Spanish official in the Philippines), was first married to the Boston merchant George Sturgis who, following a few fortune-making years in Manila, died in 1857 at the age of forty. The younger George, the product of Josefina's second marriage to Agustín Ruiz de Santayana and christened Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás, was brought to Boston as a child to live with the Sturgises. He later came to see his "adopted" family as a spent historical force. Their type he insisted, "has since been replaced by that of great business men or millionaires, building up their fortunes at home; whereas it was part of the romance and tragedy of these Great Merchants that they amassed their fortunes abroad, in a poetic blue-water phase of commercial development that passed away with them, and made their careers and virtues impossible for their children."[1]

Hofstadter, too, could point to an impactful if less "poetic" immigrant past. His father, Emil, had come to the United States with his family in 1896, leaving behind the Jewish pale of settlement in Krakow. As a young adult Emil later moved on his own to Buffalo where he married Katherine Hill, thus giving his son something of a dual identity. "He was secret in many things," Alfred Kazin once wrote of Hofstadter, whom he befriended in the late 1930s, "in some strange no man's land between his Yiddish-speaking Polish father and his dead Lutheran mother."[2]

By "Genteel Tradition" Santayana meant the nineteenth century liberal, Protestant, Whiggish focus that retained such a

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[1] George Santayana *Persons and Places: The Background of My Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 58–9.
[2] Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 15.

powerful grip on the Boston/Cambridge world he knew so well. But more than just a regional "dialect," these values, he insisted, also negatively shaped the broader culture rendering it materialistic, moralistic, and artistically shallow. Santayana's resentment might be measured in a 1927 communication to the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks in which the philosopher decried the studied conformity that passed for a genuine culture in America. "The good things" in the country, he winked, "are football, kindness, and jazz bands," by which he meant the authentic, immediate, and nonjudgmental.[3]

Hofstadter articulates a similar questioning in *American Political Tradition*. Like Santayana, he thought the country's Wasp-property rights heritage in flux, challenged by a host of social and economic changes we might shorthand as "modernity." He has little patience for Jefferson's agrarianism, William Jennings Bryan's religion-of-the-heart, or Theodore Roosevelt's extravagant peans to rugged individualism. He shares further Santayana's epigrammatic notion that "America is a young country with an old mentality."[4] Paralyzed by a dated ideology, it has failed to mature and thus struggled to respond to a series of crises – the market crash, the decade long Depression, and the coming of the Second World War – that severely challenged its most cherished ideals. A still budding nation in the 1940s, it nevertheless remained, as Santayana complained, unproductively tied to a vision of national development no longer resonant, no longer able to meet the demands of the modern era.

Both Hofstadter and Santayana in fact perform elegant autopsies of traditions. Santayana writes of the exhaustion, one might say, of Henry Adams's America – the closing of a chapter in high Brahmin cultural expression now incapable of directing public attitudes. Hofstadter writes of the collapse, generally put, of Herbert Hoover's America, a nation so solidly laissez faire that it has remained innocent of the innovations in social welfare legislation already several decades old in Europe.

What separates the two studies is "tone" – Hofstadter's book, though felicitously expressed and argued, is a more overtly engaged exercise than "Genteel Tradition." Only thirty-two in 1948, the year of *American Political Tradition's* publication, Hofstadter was just beginning his career. More importantly, as a politically alert young man (while a graduate student he belonged briefly to a communist cell) he could link his future to the ferment coming out of the New Deal and the recent war. His work on America's ideological origins is a deeply felt project, one in which he takes a definite side. Unlike Santayana, who resigned from Harvard's philosophy department shortly after writing "Genteel Tradition" and removed to Europe, he would live with the consequences of his country's evolving cultural and economic institutions.

Interestingly, both Santayana (more lightly) and Hofstadter (more heavily) take a biographical approach to appraising America. Josiah Royce, the philosophical idealist, appears in "Genteel Tradition" as an advocate of the "Absolute," an outmoded even dangerous idea to Santayana. He describes Royce, his Harvard colleague, as a "perfect Calvinist" if the term is used to denote "an expression of the agonized conscience." Hofstadter has his share of villains too. *American Political Tradition* is filled with portraits of relics, spoilsmen, and revivalists. The Jacksonians think they're bringing back the old republic when they're really advancing liberal capitalism, Theodore Roosevelt preens as a trustbuster but is reduced by Hofstadter to a quintessential conservative, Woodrow Wilson wanted to be a great liberal leader but a deeply engrained southern Presbyterianism "drain[ed] his intellectual capacity for tolerance."[5] All of these men shared Royce's problematic faith in an absolute.

Heroes, of a kind, also reside in Santayana and Hofstadter's work. The spirit of William James lingers conspicuously about "Genteel Tradition," offering a vision, so its author insists, of a better if too rarely appreciated native temperament. James, after all, is the opposite of the unyielding absolutist; he stresses, rather, the pragmatic, spontaneous side of behavior. Santayana thinks all the more of James (also a Harvard colleague) as he was "tightly swaddled in the genteel tradition as any infant." His naturalness, sympathy for the many, and romantic sensibility opened him to a range of opinions that enlarged his capacity for thinking and feeling. In James's growth, Santayana asserted, is an example of what the American spirit can be at its best.[6]

American Political Tradition, by contrast, has fewer paragons. Only in the chapters assaying the Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips and Franklin Roosevelt does Hofstadter restrain his irony and portray practical American statesmen unhindered by the myths of American agrarianism and liberal capitalism. Roosevelt's silhouette, in fact, hangs heaviest over the book. Hofstadter began the work in 1943, with FDR still in office. Personally he thought the president facile, though Roosevelt's embrace of the New Deal and his *symbolic* meaning to America both accorded Hofstadter's respect. He saw in FDR a product of an old ducal Dutch family, even more deeply embedded in the genteel tradition than William James's, but Roosevelt "overcame" his privilege to candidly re-appraise the country's values. He both articulated and argued for, so Hofstadter maintained, a new tradition in America – one more politically liberal and culturally diverse than the generic and by now antiquated "Jeffersonianism."

Hofstadter held up for special praise a 1932 campaign speech in which FDR declared the old American political tradition,

[3] Daniel Cory, ed., *The Letters of George Santayana* (New York: Scribner's, 1955), 226.

[4] George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy and Character and Opinion in the United States*, ed., James Seaton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

[5] Ibid., 5. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 234.

[6] Santayana, *Genteel Tradition*, 13.

mired in the depths of the Depression, definitely over. Equality of opportunity no longer existed, the old farmer frontier had closed, and the vast industrial economy lacked consumers. "In cold terms," Hofstadter wrote, "American capitalism had come of age, the great era of individualism, expansion, and opportunity was dead."[7] As a critical intellectual Hofstadter had reservations about Roosevelt, but he wanted to do something more in *American Political Tradition* than simply itemize the exhaustion of serious political thought in the United States. He wished, as well, to identify a fresh path and he saw enough in the 1940s, in the still embryonic liberal order, to offer hope that the New Deal State might realize such an opportunity.

Editors often torture historians about the "relevancy" of their manuscripts and the powers that be at the House of Knopf wanted from Hofstadter an easy hook. His-late-in-the-publishing-process addition of a controlling introduction (and title) presented readers with a rather capacious narrative that explained not simply the momentous events of the past fifteen years or so, but contextualized them as a profound rupture from the deeper rhythms of national development. Hofstadter's skepticism of "The Men Who Made It," to borrow from the book's subtitle, was met more than halfway by much of the culture, eager as it was to put away false gods and perhaps just as eager to make a few new ones. In any case, many wished to move forward.

American historiography's mechanical veneration of the past, Hofstadter maintained, had long undermined its utility. Patriotic historians once acclaimed the country's Revolutionary era above all else, Romantic historians waxed platitudinously over the nation's generous religious and political liberties, and the Progressive school – the school upon which Hofstadter's generation had cut its teeth – looked back longingly on the nation's comparatively "uncomplicated" roots. Frederick Jackson Turner mourned the vanishing frontier, Charles Beard touted the virtues of isolationism, and Vernon Parrington reduced partisanship to a contest between liberals (the Franklin-Jackson-muckraking line) and conservatives (the Hamilton-Calhoun-Spoilsmen line) that ignored the country's ideological diversity. Such a spare and unhelpful understanding of America, Hofstadter argued, left the nation unprepared to reckon with the present. It could not explain the radicalism of the 1930s, the decisive move toward interventionism in the 1940s, and more broadly the climate of change collecting at midcentury and about to be felt in the areas of race, gender, and individual rights.

Despite the telling observations made by Hofstadter, however, it is doubtful that his diagnosis of America's traditions has aged better than Santayana's. Hofstadter believed, after all, that the old political discourse was done, unable to offer a compelling vision for the future. In later works he described the opponents of the new liberal order as "radical" and "paranoid" and thus unlikely to be embraced by significant numbers of Americans. He thought the New Right a spent force, crushed in Barry Goldwater's 1964 drubbing at the hands of Lyndon Johnson, the postwar liberal pol par excellence.

The subsequent Reagan Revolution – nowhere on the radar in the 1960s – calls into question Hofstadter's interpretation of modern liberalism as the country's "next" paradigmatic ideology. For the nation has unequivocally moved right over the past forty years and the Rooseveltian politics of the 1930s appears increasingly a transitional philosophy that did not long outlive the crisis times from which it emerged. Bryan's evangelicalism and Hoover's self-help sophistries seem, in fact, right at home in contemprary neo-liberal America. There is a strong case to be made, in other words, that the old liberalism may have gone into abeyance but it never really expired, and thus relatedly that the postwar "consensus" failed to grasp the ephemeral nature of the new liberal order.

Accordingly, research on the right has boomed in recent decades. Dismissive of conservatism, Hofstadter said relatively little about it in *American Political Tradition*. There are no chapter treatments of the Adamses or of Alexander Hamilton; Henry Clay and William Howard Taft are relegated to a few citations; Thomas Dewey – FDR's final presidential opponent and a symbol of moderate conservatism – appears nowhere in the text. The idiosyncratic John C. Calhoun, rather, largely carries the cross of conservatism in the book. He is, in Hofstadter's hands, the "Marx of the Master Class," the South Carolina aristocrat who promoted a theory of class-consciousness from the right. But in developing the idea of Calhoun as fundamentally a theoretician, Hofstadter, writing in the early days of the modern civil rights movement, failed to stress the planter's more germane role, that of forging a legal and constitutional argument for the retention of race-based servitude. Hofstadter calls Calhoun a "highly abstract and isolated" thinker, and yet Americans continue to wrestle with the meanings and implications of race in their republic.[8] One could just as easily say that Calhoun remains an immediate and contested symbol. Yale's decision in 2017 to rename Calhoun College after the computer scientist and United States Navy rear admiral Grace Murray Hopper certainly suggests as much. But in any case, neither Calhoun nor any of the other "Men Who Made It" profiled in *American Political Tradition* can help explain the coming of post sixties conservatism.

As a study in cultural criticism, by contrast, Santayana's skewering of the country's genteel tradition might be read today as a premonitory piece. The Victorian code of conduct, the Boston Brahmin mentality, and the codification of "Wasp" as the normative national type have never made their return. Rather, a more self-consciously multicultural vision of the country has, with dissenters to be sure, taken root.

[7] Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 326.

[8] Ibid., 90.

It is easy to see that Santayana's attack on the genteel tradition contained an unmistakably personal dimension – and one can say the same of Hofstadter's *American Political Tradition*. It is the work of an involved scholar living in the midst of tumultuous times. That the book so intensely reflected the socio-politico concerns from which it emerged is not surprising, its author never ceased responding to his environment. Hofstadter's excellent dissertation, published as *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), assayed the ideas behind America's property-rights inheritance that were to fall in the 1930s; his Pulitzer Prize winning study on recent progressive movements in America, *The Age of Reform* (1955), wrestled with McCarthyism, whose seeds he saw in the populism of the past; His biting book of essays, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), diagnosed the flair up of conspiratorial politics on the right while its follow-up, *The Progressive Historians* (1968), written in the shadow of the radical sixties, somewhat defensively defended Hofstadter's scholarly generation in light of its young critics who found a "conflict" interpretation of the past (revisiting Beard and company) more relevant to their divided times.

Hofstadter's final, posthumously published book, *America at 1750* (1971), a fragment of what promised to be a major multivolume interpretation of America, reemphasized the consensus theme with "comity," the book's ubiquitous signifier, serving as the saving grace that alleviated social tensions in the colonial world. One might note in his critical portrait of narrow New England ("strikingly homogeneous") an echo of Santayana's swipe at the Brahmin. It is also not difficult to see in the study that Puritanism, conspicuously absent from *American Political Tradition*, is part of the old liberal line that needed to be overturned in the 1930s. As Hofstadter designated FDR the representative figure of his era, he considered the Pennsylvania colony, where "minority sectarians . . . flock[ed]," the emblem of the country's pluralistic future.[9]

But whether reading vintage or more recent Hofstadter, it is clear that the interpretive distance between his generation and our own is great. Whereas the postwar historians stressed the country's sense of ideological unity, we meditate on the ubiquity of our "culture wars" in what Daniel T. Rodgers has recently called the *Age of Fracture* (2011). As the decades pass it appears increasingly evident that *American Political Tradition* is as much an historical document as a work of scholarship. It represents, perhaps above all, the high hopes of midcentury liberalism at the dawn of the American Century. Just as Turner's frontier thesis offered a powerful narrative to explain the ascendant Midwest, Hofstadter proposed an interpretation of the past consistent with a new era's social, ideological, and economic needs. In such timely ministrations are traditions often made.

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[9] Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 17, 20.