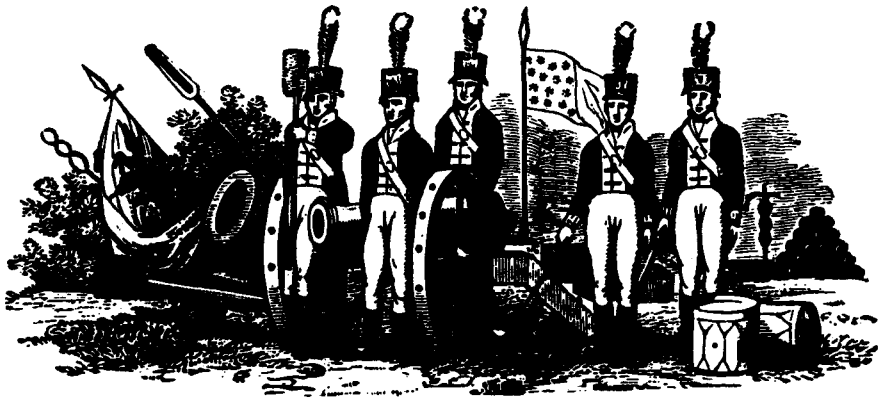
BOOKS



Elitism on the Left

KENNETH S. LYNN

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN AMERICAN LIFE, by Richard Hofstadter. *Knopf. $6.95.*

Marx and Mencken make a strange pair of bedfellows, but they have had, nevertheless, a curiously intimate relationship in our intellectual history. All through the 1920's the Tory from Baltimore abused left-wing artists and social theorists as enthusiastically as he did Baptist theologians. Yet when the Depression killed Mencken's authority (for what, after all, could have been more irrelevant to the mood of the early 1930's than Mencken's insistence that the proper function of the American intelligentsia was to stand on the sidelines of the national scene and jeer?), his iconoclastic spirit was kept alive by the very sort of intellectual whose politics he most despised. Thus in October, 1932, when more than half a hundred well-known writers, painters, and teachers called on the nation to vote the Communist ticket in the upcoming Presidential election, they did so in a language that was more reminiscent of the *American Mercury* than of *Das Kapital:* ". . . we reject the disorder, the lunacy spawned by grabbers, advertisers, traders, speculators, salesmen, the much-adulated, . . . stupid and irresponsible 'business men' . . ."

As Richard Hofstadter was to point out some years later in a brilliant essay called "John C. Calhoun: The Marx of the Master Class," elitist critiques of the business civilization have sometimes borne a startling resemblance to radical critiques. Those intellectuals who in 1932 hated the bourgeoisie sufficiently to urge the election of William Z. Foster as President found in Mencken's earlier attacks on the "booboisie" an invaluable arsenal of invective.

Elements of Menckenism occasionally cropped up inside the New Deal. With his patrician sense of humor, Roosevelt took a Menckenian delight in smashing the shams of middle-class culture—as for example in his famous "fellow immigrants" salute to the D.A.R. The rise of the great alphabetical agencies and of "government by experts" also engendered within the administration a certain disregard for democratic decision-making which roughly approximated Mencken's contempt for *vox populi.* But for the most part, the intellectuals of the New Deal era, both in and out of the government, felt themselves to be in basic harmony with the American majority. The estranged feelings of the 1920's were as dead as Prohibition.

Yet ever since the end of the Second World War, neo-Menckenism has been growing increasingly more evident in American thought. As in the 1920's, a postwar prosperity has proved congenial to the spread of elitist disaffection. But unlike in the earlier period, the most influential expressions of this disaffection have not come from the political Right but from radicals and liberals; not from Tories like Russell Kirk and William Buckley (whose attempts to be provocative are so unconscionably boring) but from left-wing writers like Dwight Macdonald, whose lively style—once an anti-capitalist weapon—is now employed to defend high culture against the threats of midcult and masscult; and above all from a group of remarkably able professors, most of them social scientists and historians, who take their stand somewhere within the broad spectrum of liberalism.

Of this latter group, one of the most notable figures is Richard Hofstadter of Columbia. Hofstadter remarked some years ago that the "tradition of Progressive reform is the one upon which I was reared and upon which my political sentiments were formed." He is also an ardent admirer of Adlai Stevenson, whom he has called "a politician of uncommon mind and style." Nevertheless, for the past fifteen years Hofstadter's writings have largely consisted of an assault, steadily intensifying in severity and widening in scope, on the main historical assumptions of American liberalism. In the absence of a powerful and searching critique from conservatives, he has sought to provide our liberal tradition with what he calls "self-criticism."

WHEN *The American Political Tradition,* the first of his assaults, appeared in 1948, the elitist bias of the book was so ambiguously set forth that it went entirely unremarked by reviewers. The author's introductory statement that American democracy "has been a democracy in cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity" and the debunking essay on F.D.R. were not taken to be a farewell to New Deal assumptions about the American character, which in fact they were. No one speculated as to why the life of that anti-egalitarian egghead, John C. Calhoun, should have evoked Hofstadter's finest effort, nor

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did his contemptuous treatment of Bryan remind anyone of Mencken's compliments to the Great Commoner. An overtitled book (for it was really a collection of astringent essays with little or no connection between them), *The American Political Tradition* was justly criticized for failing to deliver what the package promised. But no one thought to suggest that the book might more appropriately have been called *Prejudices: First Series.*

The Age of Reform and *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (both 1955) made Hofstadter's intent much clearer. To put it another way, these books revealed a mind in full revulsion from the populistic hysteria of McCarthyism, the religious zeal of John Foster Dulles, and the materialistic vulgarity of the age of affluence. They also revealed the effect that these phenomena had had on Hofstadter's attitude toward the use of historical materials. By a ruthless concentration on the psychological irrationality of the Populists, *The Age of Reform* produced some stunning revelations that have permanently eliminated a number of sentimentalisms (of "the people, yes" variety) from our political thinking, but in ignoring the very real economic and sociological grievances of the Western farmers in the 1890's, Hofstadter also risked the charge of scholarly irresponsibility. Although *Academic Freedom* was partly the work of a colleague, Walter P. Metzger, the same charge is applicable. The book's interesting account of the development of higher learning in America is offset by the fact that it is a brutally anachronistic narrative which reads the issue of academic freedom back into periods of history when the issue did not exist as such. In the 1950's, in sum, Hofstadter developed the habit of relating history to the morning headlines, for his primary intent was to create an elitist myth of the American past that might somehow serve as a lifeline to beleaguered intellectuals in a scary present.

In his latest work, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, a book that was also "conceived in response to the political and intellectual conditions of the 1950's," Hofstadter wraps the mantle of Mencken more tightly about him than ever before. That his apostolic successor should have turned out to be not only a liberal but a professor would have mightily amused the maestro of the *Mercury*, for as Hofstadter points out, "No one . . . ever poured more scorn on the American professoriat than H. L. Mencken." Yet the blithe journalist would surely have been pleased by the professor's appreciative praise of his "unique gift of mockery," and by Hofstadter's occasional resurrections of Menckenian prose—as when he likens poets who serve on faculty committees to Mencken's celebrated image of hummingbirds in *Kartoffelsuppe*.

But the sincerest form of flattery *Anti-intellectualism* pays to Mencken is in its basic thesis. The main enemies of the American mind, Hofstadter proclaims, have stemmed from three sources: populist democracy, the business mentality, and evangelical Protestantism—the very same unholy trinity that was described some forty years ago as Bryanism, Babbittry, and the Bible Belt. The sole difference between the two listings is that only one of them is intentionally outrageous.

There is considerable evidence, to be sure, that Hofstadter feels uneasy about the historical worth of his latest book. In his prefatory note, he is at pains to state, "this work is by no means a formal history but largely a personal book," and he acknowledges that he has developed the theme in a "rather impulsive" and "only fragmentary" manner; a few pages later, suddenly conscience-stricken by the thought that anti-intellectualism is not exclusively an American phenomenon, he ruefully admits, "this is not, as it perhaps should be, a comparative study." Hoping possibly to deflect accusations of anachronism, he himself voices doubts on whether his theme is "a historical subject" at all. Above all, he is anxious that his historical imagination not be judged simplistic. "I do not suffer," he declares, "from the delusion that the complexities of American history can be satisfactorily reduced to a running battle between the eggheads and the fatheads." And he is quite aware—so he assures us—that his study is by no means a balanced assessment of our culture, any more than "a history of bankruptcies could be taken as a full history of our business life." Seldom if ever in American historiography has a book begun so apologetically.

In the four hundred pages that follow, obscurantism holds sway. As has never before been true of Hofstadter, his mythmaking urge dominates his narrative to the point where he has very little to say to the reader who turns to history for information rather than for parables. In his discussion of the Great Awakening of the 1730's and 1740's, for example, he rehearses a familiar story of how the flaming emotionalism of the revivals threatened the historic Puritan ideal of an educated ministry, but his horror at the intellectual wreckage created by Senator Joe McCarthy's "revival" tempts him into lurid distortions of what the passionate outbursts of the mid-eighteenth century really signified. While Hofstadter grudgingly admits that the evangelical movement "did not have an unambiguously bad effect on intellect and learning," he creates the impression that educational institutions like Princeton, Brown, and Dartmouth were established not as a consequence of the marvelous cultural vitality that was unleashed by the spiritual passion of the revivals but because a narrow-minded factionalism required indoctrination centers for the young. (When he comes to the nineteenth-century revivals, Hofstadter explains away the evangelists' incorrigible impulse to found colleges as status consciousness.) His portraits of the Awakening's leaders are largely exercises in verbal trickery. Since it would be virtually impossible to argue that the mighty mind of Jonathan Edwards was even incipiently anti-intellectual, Hofstadter disposes of him by suggesting that Edwards was not a typical leader and by implying that his influence was largely restricted to "the town of Northampton and the surrounding country." With the idol of thousands of New Englanders safely relegated to oblivion, Hofstadter runs roughshod over Edwards's lesser contemporaries. Gilbert Ten-

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nent, to cite only one example, is dismissed as one of the "lesser tub-thumpers and foot-stampers," yet five pages later—in perfect illustration of his general strategy of being careful to bandage whomever he has most recklessly cut down—Hofstadter himself gives the lie to this description by declaring that Tennent was "not the ignorant lout that has often been pictured." In his eagerness to do battle with American demagogues, Hofstadter unfortunately adopts some of their most unattractive methods.

THE DEFICIENCIES of *Anti-intellectualism* multiply as the focus shifts to the opponents of revivalism. Although in his opening apology Hofstadter denies being so hopelessly confused as to identify intellectualism with rationalism, this is precisely what he does. Thus the Reverend Charles Chauncy's well-bred abhorrence of mob "enthusiasm" is made to seem an intellectual virtue. Surely, however, it was the cautious and corpse-cold mind of Chauncy, whose theological "reasonableness" lent a covert endorsement to the crass commercialism of the age, that symbolized the most potent enemy of intellectual freedom—in its highest and truest sense—in eighteenth-century America.

Because he fails to understand how a rationalistic and prudential theology dovetailed with the conservative politics of the merchant class, Hofstadter is powerless to explain the election of 1800. By the logic of the chapters on revivalism, it should have been the tub-thumpers and the foot-stampers who excoriated Jefferson for the sin of thinking, and it should have been the intellectual heirs of Chauncy who defended the unfettered life of the mind. In fact, the reverse was true. Federalists like Fisher Ames, who exalted "men of practical sense," were as fearful of Jefferson's bold ideas as Chauncy had been of Edwards's. In New England, political support for the most intellectual candidate for the Presidency in all of American history came largely from the revivalist sects. With his theory about patricians and Populists coming apart at the seams in its first political test case, Hofstadter condemns the mud-slinging of the Federalists as a "treason" (whereas they actually behaved in perfect consistency with their historic animus against visionaries), helplessly dismisses the political behavior of the revivalists as "curious," and moves on in search of less baffling elections.

When he reaches Jacksonian America, everything suddenly becomes miraculously clear: "Just as the evangelicals repudiated a learned religion and a formally constituted clergy in favor of the wisdom of the heart and direct access to God, so did advocates of egalitarian politics propose to dispense with trained leadership in favor of the native practical sense of the ordinary man with its direct access to truth."

As clear as mud, that is, for Orestes Brownson, William Cullen Bryant, George Bancroft, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Kirke Paulding, Walt Whitman, and many lesser writers and intellectuals identified themselves with Jacksonism. How could they have done this to themselves, when the egalitarian Democracy was supposedly so hostile to eggheads? More importantly, how could they have done this to Richard Hofstadter? Once again, inky clouds of words shoot out to obscure the facts—"The support of such men was welcomed in Jacksonian ranks, and was sometimes greeted with pride, but on the whole, intellectuals were not accorded much recognition or celebrity"—and, like the cuttlefish, the historian scoots away into the ever-promising future.

FINALLY, after many more narrow escapes, he reaches the 1950's—where he really has been all along. Even here, however, on home grounds, his analysis of the alienation and conformity patterns of the modern intellectual is vastly unsatisfactory. He begins with a lengthy discussion of a symposium conducted a few years ago in the *Partisan Review*, a periodical he describes as "a kind of house organ of the American intellectual community." The intense parochialism of that description is precisely what ails the entire analysis. In his view of the contemporary American scene as in his view of the American past, Hofstadter sees the preoccupations of a very special cross-section of the na-

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tional intelligentsia writ very large indeed.

If he could ever break through his provincial prejudices into broader and deeper formulations of elitism, Hofstadter might conceivably become our first Mill rather than merely our second Mencken, for he is a brilliant and dedicated man who is deeply concerned about the quality of our civilization. But until such time as he does achieve that breakthrough, he will never succeed in providing American liberalism with the penetrating self-criticism he rightly believes it needs. «»

Neo-Beat

NAT HENTOFF

THE MESSENGER, by Charles Wright. *Farrar, Straus. $3.95.*

Following the decline of Jack Kerouac and his genre of misty disaffiliation, there has been less talk recently about the Beats. Still among us, however, are those who reject the "square" world. They prefer to subsist on the periphery of society rather than commit themselves to full-time upward mobility, with—by their criteria—its debatable rewards and chronic compromises.

In his first novel, Charles Wright speaks for one such outsider. His protagonist, Charles Stevenson, is apparently not greatly different in background and attitude from the author himself. Stevenson is a messenger only in order to eat and pay his rent. For the rest of the time, he wanders—more as an observer than as a participant—through intersecting demi-mondes. Most of his acquaintances are homosexuals, prostitutes, and con men. The messenger has writing aspirations; but in his twenty-ninth year, he is a transient in New York with no specific goal except to move on somewhere else. He stands, as he puts it, "at a distance from life."

Unlike Kerouac and his boyish emulators, Wright views the microcosms of the disaffiliated with a total lack of sentimentality. The fact that the messenger and his associates scorn middle-class values has brought them few positive satisfactions. The messenger himself is acutely lonely. ("Anything is better than being aware of your own breathing.") He also has no illusions about the ways in which his fellow dissidents cozen themselves into poses of joyousness.

Hardly anyone he knows, in bleak fact, is really honest, and that realization is the cold core of *The Messenger*. He admits this condition, common to both squares and hipsters, without self-pity or self-righteousness. His defensive stance is ironic, but he can be surprised into acknowledging his own vulnerability. There is, for example, a spare, painfully direct description of a Puerto Rican woman whose drunken husband has smashed their month-old son against the wall. The messenger cannot help but respond with compassion, but then he walks away; there is nothing he can do for her.

The messenger is a Negro; and inevitably he has to confront dimensions of hypocrisy and guilt that white drifters are spared. Yet the messenger's color is only part of the reason for his detachment. Looking at a crowd of office workers, he sees "my people too, like dark dots in a white field"; and he recognizes that "I could become one of the horde, despite the fact that I am Negro." But his conception of meaningful living calls for more than getting "a soft, white-collar job, save the coins, marry, and all in the name of middle-class sanctity."

The messenger does not yet know, however, what it is he *does* want. He tries to force himself into a posture of not allowing himself to care what becomes of him. ("The sin is believing, hoping. But I am too tired, too afraid now to commit this sin.") Nonetheless, there is enough hope in Stevenson-Wright to have produced a book and to drive the messenger at its end to get a bus ticket to Mexico.

Charles Wright may not yet have "found" himself, but he has an advantage over the more self-adulatory Beats in that he knows who he is not. As a writer, he has developed a deceptively simple style that is clearly the result of honest distillation of experience and hard-won craftsmanship. And in this discipline itself there is a kind of commitment.

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