Book Review: Anti-Intellectualism in American Life

In April of 2009, David Frum, a popular conservative journalist and former economic speechwriter for President George W. Bush, posed the question on his FrumForum blog as to whether Richard Hofstadter’s “great masterwork,” Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (1963), had been rendered obsolete by the social and political developments of the past four decades. Frum, who in many ways embodies the kind of right-wing disdain for intellectualism that Hofstadter repeatedly warns against, proceeds to offer up a list of arenas in which the modern-day intellectual has become a welcome and willing participant – from politics and the military to business and even network television. Ultimately, although he credits Hofstadter with successfully “tracing the origins of the particular forms of disparagement most often seen in American culture,” Frum concludes that the late historian’s “magnum opus [deserves] attention more as an epitaph for a bygone era than as an analysis of the culture in which contemporary Americans still live.”

Of course, one can only offer a guess as to what Hofstadter’s reply might be, for he died of leukemia in 1970, leaving behind an unfinished, three-volume history of the United States as well as generations of admiring scholars and devotees. However, even if he agreed with Frum’s general premise regarding the intellectual’s place in the current culture, Hofstadter would surely point out that his book, however ideologically driven it might have been, was far more concerned with historical analysis than political commentary. He also recognized that it was a unique and complicated history, and not merely a “running battle between the eggheads and the fatheads.”
“Moreover,” he writes, “to the extent that our history can be considered one of cultural and intellectual conflicts, the public is not simply divided into intellectual and anti-intellectual factions.” (p. 19)

Hofstadter’s book, then, is a nuanced examination of one aspect of the American experience. Sweeping in scope, it is at once both chronological and thematic, covering the causes and consequences of anti-intellectualism from the time of the Founding Fathers to the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Organized into four main parts, along with a lengthy introduction and conclusion representing parts unto themselves, *Anti-Intellectualism* is structured around what Hofstadter considers to be the four major sources of hostility toward intellectuals, both past and present.

The first and perhaps most influential source, the author contends, is religion, specifically evangelical Protestantism. Hofstadter goes to great lengths to explain how in America, more than in any other culture, evangelicalism — with its emphasis on emotion and personal salvation — supplanted the rational and learned religion of the established Christian churches. Beginning with the first Great Awakening, the evangelicals, according to Hofstadter, became the dominant voice in American religious life, while the educated clergy of the established churches, once the root of intellectualism in this country, faded into the background. As Hofstadter explains, “The Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular crusader and exhorter.” (p. 86) It was the evangelicals, he argues, who proved willing and able to adapt to the changing conditions of American life, most notably its westward expansion, which Hofstadter uses as a symbol for the vulgarization of American society. Particularly damning in this regard are the descriptions he includes of frontier and “squatter” communities in the Midwest, including Lincoln’s Indiana,
where education and culture were virtually nonexistent. Part of this, Hofstadter reasoned, owed to the fact people were constantly on the move, and therefore they were “constantly outrunning the institutions of settled society.” (p. 76) He later revisits this argument in a chapter on “Business and Intellect,” noting that as business spread rapidly into the trans-Alleghany region of the Midwest, “cultural institutions and leisured habits of mind were left behind.”

In addition to the role that religious views played in anti-intellectualist sentiment, Hofstadter contends that democracy itself, at least to the extent that it developed throughout the nineteenth century, resulted in the further weakening of the intellectual’s position within society. After all, he explained, in a true government of, by and for the people, there would be little need for the “self-interested knowledge” of the elite classes and far more pressing demand for the “practical sense of the ordinary man.” Indeed, Hofstadter argued, “as popular democracy gained strength and confidence, it reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom.” (p. 154) Therefore, men like Andrew Jackson would emerge as “primitivist” national heroes whereas cultured and scholarly men like John Quincy Adams were dismissed as relics of the “decadent” European past. What’s more, Hofstadter points to a growing perception throughout this period of the male intellectual as effeminate and ineffectual, characterized by the reformers who were generally deemed unfit for the “difficult and dirty work of day-to-day politics.” It was a perception that continued to flourish until the Progressive Era, according to Hofstadter. And yet even then, during the so-called “golden age” of intellectual participation and acceptance, it took an overtly masculine leader like Teddy Roosevelt to begin to convince the average American that “this type of man had a useful part to play.” (p. 196)

In the third part of Anti-Intellectualism, Hofstadter shifts his focus to the American businessman — the capitalist — and his “extensive devotion to practicality and direct experience,” which
stands in direct conflict with the intellectuals and their devotion to theoretical pursuits. In fact, Hofstadter goes so far as to suggest that the two groups are diametrically opposed, or “bound to conflict.” He writes: “The values of business and intellect are seen as eternally and inevitably at odds: on the one side, there is the money-centered or power-centered man, who cares only about bigness and the dollar…on the other side, there are the men of critical intellect, who distrust American civilization and concern themselves with quality and moral values.” (p. 234-5)

Of course, it should be noted that Hofstadter possessed quite a narrow viewpoint of intellectuals, owing in large part to his own disdain for capitalism. And here lies perhaps the central weakness of his award-winning book: Hofstadter, himself a former member of the Communist Party who once declared, “I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it,” seems almost unwilling to acknowledge that intellectualism could flow from the right. Furthermore, he repeatedly aligns intellectualism with liberalism, as if the two are one in the same. He unapologetically exalts the left, characterizing its members as “sensitive to nuances,” “relativist and skeptical,” whereas he the conservatives, of which the lowest form would be the fundamentalists, “look upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil.”

Hofstadter also comes off as inconsistent at times, particularly when dealing with the question of progress and modernity. On the one hand, while discussing the Scopes trial and the cultural showdown over Darwinism, Hofstadter portrays the fundamentalists and even the average American as being fearful of losing their grip on the past and the values contained therein. However, he sounds quite a different note when discussing the businessman’s disdain for culture, which he said “rests on a widely shared contempt for the past.” “With their minds fixed on the future,” he writes, “Americans found themselves surrounded with ample land and resources and
best by a shortage of labor and skills,” while the past was seen as “despicably impractical and uninventive, simply and solely as something to be surmounted.” (p. 238)

Moving on from the capitalist’s assault on intellectualism, Hofstadter concludes the book with a detailed and lengthy examination of the American education system. Here he finds yet another case where practicality has superseded knowledge or any sort of higher moral purpose. Although he acknowledges from the outset Americans’ “persistent, intense, and sometimes touching faith in the efficacy of popular education,” Hofstadter describes the entire system, particularly from the end of the nineteenth century onward, as a “constant disappointment.” (p. 305) From a teacher’s perspective, the entire fourth part of the book is a fascinating read, as it traces the historical roots of what so many perceive to be modern-day ills. Ultimately, however, his criticisms of education — and of John Dewey’s child-centric theories — lack the kind of vision that intellectuals like himself are purported to possess in great quantities. His laments are also ironic, for they come from a man who was widely regarded to be a poor teacher — a man who, during all of those years spent at Columbia University, devoted little attention or passion to his students and who instead focused on his own intellectual pursuits.