What's the Matter with Resentment? Richard Hofstadter's Understanding of Political Paranoia

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ABSTRACT

For many commentators, the present age reminds them of Richard Hofstadter's writings on the paranoid style. Proliferation of references, however, does not mean consistency of terminology. How did Hofstadter conceive of Far Right rhetoric? This article is an interpretive analysis, focusing first on his account of how pseudoconservatives effectively utilized paranoid rhetoric. Next, I explore Hofstadter's view of mass politics, showing a connection between promoters of political paranoia and consumers of paranoid ideas: crucially, he saw the paranoid style as requiring resentful masses to be effective. Finally, I point out some differences between Hofstadter's time and today through an interpretation of a May 2017 White House document, "POTUS & Political Warfare." I conclude that even though many of Hofstadter's terms are applicable for the twenty-first century, some of the conditions for mass social resentment have shifted.

In October of 2016, while on the stump for Democratic candidates, President Obama remarked that the Republican nominee's rhetorical style hardly seemed new. "Donald Trump . . . didn't build the building himself," Obama said. "He just slapped his name on it and took credit for it."[1] The comment, which

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1. For context, see Beckwith (2016).

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alluded to Trump's property business, pointed to a trend in American politics that stokes citizens' fears.[2] Many intellectuals have joined Obama in remarking on connections between President Trump and twentieth-century political figures like Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater.[3] Like Trump, McCarthy and Goldwater appealed to public restlessness and dissatisfaction with the state of affairs and blamed groups inside and outside the United States for our social ills.[4] Trump had not invented Trumpism. He was merely playing from a new edition of an old handbook.

Yet even if Donald Trump had not been elected (or even run for president), the old handbook has become a common rhetorical strategy among conservatives and, consequently, a source of consternation among public intellectuals (Bartlett 2017). Critics have noted the absurdity of talking points, including those about health care rationing through "death panels" and the racist questioning of Obama's birth certificate (promoted, most notably, by Donald Trump; Rutenberg and Calmes 2009). In the early twenty-first century, intellectuals worried about the loss of reason and rationality in political discussion (Jacoby 2008). And in the 1990s, writers like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. were concerned about Republicans' hyperbolic denunciations of the federal government (1995). Criticism of this old handbook has come from many places along the ideological spectrum.

For many of those expressing criticism, Republican rhetoric was reminiscent of what Richard Hofstadter described over a half century ago in "The Pseudo-conservative Revolt" (written in 1954) and "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (written in 1963; Hofstadter 1996b, 1996d). References to Hofstadter have become so prevalent in the opinion pages that David Greenberg once ironically suggested that "there should probably be a moratorium on invoking 'the paranoid style'" (2006). His comment pointed to a problem of proliferation. Intellectuals who refer to Hofstadter do not always explain the ideas they attribute to him. Instead, partially because of format, op-eds and other commentaries

2. Later, out campaigning for Democrats in the midterm elections, Obama was more explicit. On one college campus, he said, "[Trump] is a symptom, not the cause. He's just capitalizing on resentments that politicians have been fanning for years, a fear and anger that's rooted in our past, but it's also born of the enormous upheavals that have taken place in your brief lifetimes" (qtd. in Baker 2018).

3. In fact, Trump's mentor Roy Cohn worked for McCarthy (Mahler and Flegenheimer 2016). For Trump's style in general, see Moyers and Winship (2016).

4. For example, Trump's campaign speeches associated immigration reform with battling Daesh (or ISIS, as it prefers to be called). At one stop in Springfield, OH, a couple of weeks before the election, Trump said, "We don't want ISIS in our country. . . . I only want to admit people who will support this country and love its people. So important. Keeping our families safe is the highest obligation of the president of the United States" (qtd. in Schrock et al. 2017, 16). On immigration, Trump characterized Hillary Clinton's proposed policies as "uncontrolled immigration": "mass amnesty, mass immigration, and mass lawlessness" (Bump and Blake 2016).

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usually connect (often accurately) one or two aspects of Hofstadter's thought to current events.

Such a range of references nonetheless conveys a false sense of malleability to Hofstadter's ideas. Some pieces focus on his conception of citizens' feelings of persecution, dispossession, and xenophobia (Edsall 2016), moods that may culminate in expressions of apocalypticism (Ferguson 2016). Other writers have examined today's paranoid messengers, the Republicans on Capitol Hill (Krugman 2006, 2009; Cobb 2017) and formerly fringe conservative commentators (Sykes 2017a, 2017b). And some, such as Christine Rosen (2017), have drawn on Hofstadter to explore the current popularity of dystopian novels and television shows as acts of denial, by which she means unconscious strategies to avoid recognizing liberal reactionary politics. Even intellectuals of a similar mind-set often employ Hofstadter in divergent ways. For example, Paul Krugman (2006, 2009) invokes Hofstadter to discuss present-day conspiracy theories, while Jelani Cobb (2017) draws on the essayist to discuss a tendency among conservatives to see much of American history as a grand conspiracy.

Some of Hofstadter's ideas have even become so widespread that writers need not mention him by name, such as Colin Dickey's (2017) work on liberal paranoia and Ross Douthat's (2008) discussion of conspiracy-oriented films. Yet in the latter, titled "The Return of the Paranoid Style," the term means only a general attitude of conspiracy and cynicism.

Renewed interest in Hofstadter therefore invites rethinking. How did Hofstadter really envision the concept of political paranoia? One common theme among many of the new Hofstadter commentaries is the idea that citizens perceive the world in false ways, leading to feelings of anxiety about social standing and bitterness about one's present circumstances. Such feelings of *status resentment* can lead to kneejerk reactions, including the scapegoating of immigrants or other groups deemed to be "subversive." Yet Hofstadter, like many others, chose to distinguish between notions of status and class. Those suffering economically are not always the victims of false consciousness. Their feelings of *economic resentment*, which may also lead to irrational political behavior, are a fundamentally different political phenomenon. Few contemporary references to Hofstadter remark on the distinction. Consequently, all political paranoia may appear to be of the same, easily discredited, origin.

This article discusses the paranoid style and resentment in the writings of Richard Hofstadter.[5] It is not a comprehensive study of Hofstadter (Baker 1985; Brown 2006), nor does it debate his complicated relationship with the "consensus"

5. Following Nietzsche, some scholars prefer the term *ressentiment* rather than *resentment*. Though Hofstadter used the latter, the concepts are referenced in similar ways. For a recent use of the former, see Dolgert (2016).

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school of historians (Singal 1984; Witham 2016). Although written with the present in mind, this article is not a contemporary update of "The Paranoid Style" that shows the range of its manifestations in the current political climate.[6] Instead, this article is an interpretive analysis of Hofstadter's views on political paranoia, its origins, and its manifestations. It takes to heart the interpretivist notion that Hofstadter was, after all, a product of his life experiences and the politics of the postwar era.[7] Yet he was also a meaning-making intellectual who conceived of ideas differently than other scholars. Concepts such as the *paranoid style* and *resentment* are not used in the same way, in Hofstadter's time or today.[8]

In this work, I claim that the paranoid style, often employed by figures Hofstadter called pseudoconservatives, required resentful masses to be effective. This article first describes Hofstadter's ideological shifts amid political change in New York. It then discusses the concepts of political paranoia and pseudoconservatism as Hofstadter understood them. Next, it explores the concept of mass society and how, according to Hofstadter, resentful masses are more susceptible to paranoid rhetoric. Finally, it compares Hofstadter's sense of social restlessness with that found in a recent National Security Council document, "POTUS & Political Warfare." By interpreting Hofstadter's ideas, we may be in a better position to address the age of Trump. Though one finds consistency among practitioners of the paranoid style, the nature of mass social resentment and its economic context has changed: postdepression comfort has been replaced by postrecession malaise. The consequences of disjuncture were more than economic. The politics of status resentment and economic resentment now occur in a complex combination that Hofstadter did not anticipate.

HOFSTADTER AS REFORMED RADICAL

Discussions of political paranoia today usually occur in the context of liberals or radicals criticizing the political Right. While Hofstadter, too, is sometimes seen as an opponent of conservatism (Perlstein 2017), he did not think of himself that way. Hofstadter read widely, allowing himself to be influenced by ideas from across the political spectrum. According to two of his former students,

6. For a recent and able update, see Appelrouth (2017). For an examination of *The Age of Reform*, see Johnston (2007). For an application of Hofstadter's "paranoid style" to the present, see Stein and Salime (2015).

7. As E. H. Carr famously put it, "The historian, being an individual, is also a product of history and society; and it is in this twofold light that the student of history must learn to regard him" (1961, 54).

8. C. Wright Mills stands out for his more radical understanding of politics on the right, especially on what he called "practical conservatism" (1956/2000).

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Hofstadter "found it no guarantee of merit that ideas should originate from either 'left' or 'right'; they might, conversely, flourish in either setting" (Elkins and McKitrick 1974, 329). He was committed not to averaging all political opinions but to the belief that ideas could come from anywhere. He thought that ideas, like works of history, should stand or fall on their own merits.

As a student at the University of Buffalo, Hofstadter's politics were far more radical. He married a leftist intellectual and activist, Felice Swados, and the two of them became enmeshed in radical political life, first in Buffalo and then in New York City, where they moved in 1936 for his graduate studies (Baker 1985, 71–93; Foner 2002, 36–37; Brown 2006, 11–15, 47–49). He was even a member of the Communist Party for 4 months, from late 1938 to February 1939, but found it difficult to toe the party line (Brown 2006, 25). Then, after news came of the nonaggression pact between Stalin and Hitler, Hofstadter moved away from the views of fellow radicals. His complaint was not necessarily about Marxism. Rather, Hofstadter grew contemptuous of many of the people who had adopted a Marxist worldview. To him, they seemed uncritical, indoctrinated, and unable to distinguish between their own thoughts and the political programs to which they were attached. In a 1939 letter to Harvey Swados, Hofstadter reflected, "I hate capitalism and everything that goes with it. But I also hate the simpering dogmatic religious-minded Janizaries [militants] that make up the CP [Communist Party]. I hate their regimented thinking" (qtd. in Baker 1985, 151).

Hofstadter's retreat from leftist politics continued after Felice's death in 1945. In a letter to his former mentor, Merle Curti, Hofstadter noted that he had "grown a great deal more conservative" (qtd. in Foner 2002, 41). His later colleagues at Columbia University expressed surprise that Hofstadter was ever interested in Marxism—for Alfred Kazin, it was like "imagining Pope Pius doing a striptease" (qtd. in Brown 2006, 25). Love returned when Hofstadter met Beatrice Kevitt, herself a widow, in 1946; they married early the following year (Brown 2006, 49). According to his students, Beatrice would prove to be an influential editor who refined Hofstadter's prose (Elkins and McKitrick 1974, 308n8; Foner 2002, 206n16). She did not, however, instill a rejuvenation of radicalism.

Despite disillusionment, Hofstadter's writings retained some Marxist elements (Baker 1985; Lasch 1989). He did not shy away from framing social change in terms of class conflict or even the passing reference to the "dialectic of history" (Hofstadter 1955, 130). In fact, according to Baker (1985), the notion of the dialectic (as expressed in Hegel and Marx) remained Hofstadter's primary interpretive tool. For Baker, Hofstadter's preference for irony—noting the discrepancy between ideas (or rhetoric) and reality—is often taken by readers as merely an appreciation of historical twist, rather than dialectical pattern (1985,

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194). But closer inspection reveals Hofstadter's preference for discerning exchanges of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. As Baker explains, Hofstadter would note small contradictions, move on, and then return to explain their growth into large contradictions (191–95).[9] Hofstadter's politics thus took leave of his methods: an ideological shift rightward, accompanied by a historical interpretation anchored in 1930s radicalism—an irony he would have appreciated in his subjects. Yet perhaps a paradox is to be expected. As long as Hofstadter remained near New York, the geographical center of the American Left intelligentsia, he would never fully take leave of his ideological roots.[10] As Baker put it, describing New York's intellectuals, dialectics "simply dominated the era in which they all came of age" (239).

For these reasons, some scholars consider Hofstadter's postwar writings more in line with liberalism than conservatism; his views were certainly unrecognizable from conservatism as it is understood today (Pells 1989; Witham 2016). Amid an emerging cold war, intellectuals across the spectrum rethought their political views. The early postwar years were a time of uncertainty as well as creativity (O'Neill 1982; Wald 1987; Pells 1989). Among liberal ranks included self-described socialists, social democrats, and (for divergent reasons) supporters and critics of Roosevelt and Truman. Among conservative ranks included cold warriors and those favoring domestic order and traditional social structures; notably, there was not uniformity of conservative opinions on free market capitalism (McGirr 2011; Kolozi 2013). Hofstadter's somewhat more conservative views, however labeled, were nonetheless closer to the center (of the time) than the Far Right. His ideology emphasized pausing, not reversing, social change. Moreover, as Alan Brinkley's (1994) essay on twentieth-century conservatism demonstrates, Hofstadter's politics predated many familiar varieties of late twentieth and twenty-first-century conservativism. Hofstadter's views, then, were not in the model of William F. Buckley and the Catholic conservatives, distressed by the individualism and secularism of modern culture. Nor was he a neoconservative or a Straussian, ideologies that, while distinct, were each concerned with morality and tradition. And Hofstadter died a decade before the election of Ronald Reagan and the ascendency of the religious Right, which sought to transform secular attitudes about sex and the rights of women.

9. Baker elaborates: "But if one searches his work carefully for an answer to the question of how change actually came about for Hofstadter, one discerns this repetitious pattern. A fatal, originally buried, or invisible quality or characteristic rises to the surface in people's minds and eventually emerges as a glaring inconsistency or contradiction, fatally harmful to the original balance. This may be seen as the process of 'reaction' in purely Hegelian terms" (1985, 194).

10. In the intervening years, Hofstadter had not moved far: he took a doctorate in 1942 along with an assistant professorship at the University of Maryland. He returned to Columbia in 1946. A history of the period can be found in O'Neill (1982).

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Still, as time passed, the ideological shift became notable and permanent. Hofstadter's (and others') changing views also drew the ire of radical friends, especially C. Wright Mills, who reportedly kept notes on the state of his comrades' rightward drift.[11] In supporting Adlai Stevenson's 1952 presidential campaign, Hofstadter had found the embodiment of his political wishes: holding on to the gains of the thirties and forties, but stopping for reflection (Hofstadter 1955, 14; see also Foner 2002, 41). He disliked the label *new conservatism* because he considered the virtues of conservatism to be from an earlier time, akin to what he called the "old liberalism . . . modulated by a growing sense of reality" (Hofstadter 1955, 15). Hofstadter's reflections, presented with few elaborating thoughts (other than a passing reference to John Adams), suggest a complicated ideology, rooted in political life of the fifties. Far from merely adoring the center, Hofstadter found himself waiting to see the effects of reform, neither nostalgic for the past nor eagerly anticipating the future. He remained concerned, however, about those with a less sober view of history: an enduring segment of the population that desired the restoration of a pleasant, nonetheless fictitious, place in American history. In laying blame and exposing apparent conspiracies, such populists were, in Hofstadter's opinion, particularly dangerous.

POLITICAL PARANOIA

Though he was no cold warrior or anti-Communist, Hofstadter stayed silent on the firing of Communist academics (Foner 2002, 41). Instead, he chose to express his concerns in terms of characterizing the contemporary mood, mostly in print. For him, those who used the language of conspiracy were not sounding off their frustrations in isolation. He called the larger framework of conspiratorial political rhetoric the *paranoid style*, defined by its delusions of persecution—not of the individual but of the nation. Much like the psychologically paranoid man, who falsely imagines enemies around every corner, the politically paranoid rhetorician spoke of the country's enemies lurking around every corner, posing an imminent threat to security.[12] These enemies were organizations outside or inside government, or they could be well-known individuals

11. According to Hofstadter's colleague Kenneth Stampp, Mills, who was a Marxist and a Freudian, "was always psychoanalyzing us. . . . We knew that he had a file on us, all of us—his observations about Hofstadter's family and so on. . . . He was always suspicious of us, especially Hofstadter, that he was not passionate enough about his political feelings" (qtd. in Brown 2006, 129).

12. Style guidelines of the 1950s used gendered language. To avoid anachronistic descriptions, to avoid pretending that women had equal access to positions of power, and to avoid unconsciously imposing a gender-neutral vision on Hofstadter, I have chosen to replicate Hofstadter's gendered language while discussing his ideas.

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too. Frequent targets included Catholics, Communists, and intellectuals, as well as those at the highest positions in government. In the 1950s, enemies included Secretary of State George Marshall, Justices Felix Frankfurter and Earl Warren, and even recent presidents: Eisenhower, Truman, and Roosevelt (Hofstadter 1996b, 24). Such enemies were often thought to be in cahoots with foreign entities seeking the destruction of the country.

Not all conspiratorial language, however, was part of the paranoid style. A conspiracy may turn out to be true. The paranoid spokesman was different in that he treated conspiracy as the driving motor of historical change. There were, according to Hofstadter, five elements of the paranoid style. First, paranoid rhetoricians saw the world in apocalyptic terms. Our enemies are on the verge of winning, the paranoid spokesman would claim, and all of human civilization is at risk. The assessed level of danger was almost a rethinking, as if backing off slightly from guaranteed destruction. Hofstadter wrote, "The apocalypticism of the paranoid style runs dangerously near to hopeless pessimism, but usually stops short of it" (1996b, 30). Secondly, the politically paranoid had no need for compromise. The world is good versus evil, and even partial success is the same thing as failure (31).

Next, history was created not by dispassionate forces but by individuals who attempted to control the public consciousness. Rhetoricians therefore concluded: We cannot trust the news or educational systems. We must create our own sources of information. For Hofstadter, paranoid spokesmen paradoxically chose to imitate their enemies, much like anti-intellectuals who, while remaining prolific writers, filled each publication with extensive documentation. Fourth, a "special significance" was attached to the paranoid spokesman who was formerly part of the enemy, such as a reformed Mason or an ex-Communist (Hofstadter 1996b, 32–34).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, was the paranoid spokesman's obsession with proving his case. Yet as Hofstadter was quick to note, such rhetoricians were interested not in winning on the merits but in providing a simple and easily digestible account of the world. The world of the paranoid style was, Hofstadter wrote, "far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" (Hofstadter 1996b, 36). Paranoid writings had the appearance of being scholarly, with citations and seemingly sensible conclusions. But this apparent intellectualism relied on artful deception. Arguments began in the real world, with seemingly logical judgments, before taking off into fantasy. Hofstadter wrote, "What distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (37). Hofstadter considered John Robison's work on the Illuminati to be a good example: after a lengthy discussion of the Illuminati, Robison took

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readers straight into a narrative on the French Revolution. The facts may have been true, but the implication that the Illuminati caused the revolution was false. The missing information, of course, was not about the Illuminati, or even perhaps about the events of 1789, but rather about how revolutions take place. For Hofstadter, all of the surrounding evidence was provided as a "defensive act." The paranoid spokesman, after all, "has all the evidence he needs; he is not a receiver, he is a transmitter" (Hofstadter 1996b, 38).

According to Hofstadter, the paranoid style by itself has no ideology. It is a way of practicing politics that plays to human fears and other anxiety-provoking emotions, and it can be used by public figures across the ideological spectrum. Hofstadter found instances of the paranoid style in action throughout American history, such as Populist Party leaders in 1895 (about gold conspirators), the editors of the *Texas State Times* in 1855 (involving a conspiracy of European statesmen and the Pope), and a New England preacher in 1798 (about foreigners plotting the destruction of Christianity) (Hofstadter 1996b, 8–9). Nevertheless, in the postwar age, the paranoid style was a tool of the political Right. Hofstadter never pretended that the Left and Right utilized paranoid rhetoric in equal amounts.

Who was the paranoid spokesman of the postwar age? Hofstadter categorized promoters of political paranoia as adhering to the ideology of *pseudoconservatism*. Unlike the radicals C. Wright Mills or Immanuel Wallerstein (a Columbia graduate student in the early fifties), who preferred the term *practical conservatism*, Hofstadter wished to convey the phenomenon's dissimilarity from traditional conservatism. He credited the concept to Theodor Adorno (Hofstadter 1996d, 43). According to Hofstadter, conservatives emphasized slowing social change and maintaining institutions, whereas pseudoconservatives emphasized upending the social order. Pseudoconservatism was about pursuing a line of attack against the federal government, not about stewardship or consistency.[13] Pseudoconservatives took conservatism to mean economic individualism, pursued absolutely, without what Hofstadter called the "subtle manipulation" of traditional conservatives (1996a, 94). Both were concerned about the interests of business, though pseudoconservatives did not see the importance of waiting or of delayed rewards; they did not see "expediency and responsibility" as virtues (97). Pseudoconservatives identified as conservative but, in Hofstadter's opinion, were too restless about political life and too suspicious about political leaders to be genuine conservatives (1996d, 43).

13. Conservatives were concerned about rules that could be applied to government. Pseudoconservatives advanced "doctrines whose validity is to be established by polemics" (Hofstadter 1996a, 95).

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In the fifties, pseudoconservatives were angry about President Eisenhower's pragmatic approach to politics, particularly his unwillingness to roll back Roosevelt's social welfare programs and continued participation in the United Nations. Pseudoconservatives were generally opposed to government activities except, Hofstadter noted, for congressional investigations (1996d, 46). On foreign policy, pseudoconservatives took a hard, contradictory line: they disliked the Soviet Union but resisted strengthening Washington's power over Moscow, and they were even more vocal in their condemnation of aid programs to Western Europe. Hofstadter noted a paradox: pseudoconservatives disapproved of past wars yet did not worry terribly much about steering clear of future conflicts (46). Immanuel Wallerstein (1954) labeled this persona the *anti-military militarist*.

Domestic affairs earned the most attention from pseudoconservatives, who seemed convinced that public officials were about to betray the nation. They sought constitutional amendments for security, including abolishing the income tax and ending spending on social welfare (Hofstadter 1996d, 46). The pseudoconservatives occupying seats in the House and Senate defined their jobs mostly in terms of casting "no" votes. As a senator, Barry Goldwater made no effort to develop relationships with his colleagues or even regularly appear on the Senate floor to cast votes (Hofstadter 1996a, 104). Yet despite his unwillingness to compromise, or to build allies within the political establishment, Goldwater won the Republican nomination in 1964. Ascending to such a position in the political establishment meant that Goldwater was something more than an able campaigner and fundraiser. He had caught on in the public sphere (105–10).

RESENTMENT AS A POLITICAL FORCE

Who listened to the paranoid spokesman and believed his ideas? In the fifties and sixties, who voted for the pseudoconservative candidate? The most curious aspect of political paranoia was not the existence of a spokesman but the fact that he found an audience. Rhetoric needed to be consumed and believed, or at least found to be a plausible explanation of circumstances. Hofstadter was fascinated by the public mind, how everyday people thought about their circumstances, and frequently returned to a common theme: the resentful citizen, up in arms over changing times. Here "resentment" means widespread social feelings of ill will, grievance, and indignation, often in response to perceived historical wrongs. This section explores Hofstadter's sense of mass public resentment and its connection to the paranoid style.

Around the same time that he penned his first essay on political paranoia—"The Pseudo-conservative Revolt," delivered at Barnard College in 1954—Hofstadter was at work on *The Age of Reform*, a manuscript on the Gilded

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Age and Progressive Era. That summer, Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate. Hofstadter, who thought about the past with the present in mind, saw a connection.[14] For him, the era of populists and progressives seemed "to foreshadow some aspects of the cranky pseudo-conservatism of our time" (Hofstadter 1955, 20). He was driven to understand the darker side of populism, its illiberal as well as liberal manifestations. Far from being unified in their political objectives, Hofstadter realized, the populists (and progressives too) comprised both reformers and reactionaries.[15] Some of the reformers, in their fight for honest business practice and integrity in politics, also sought to enforce moral codes or to impose their values on other parts of the world.[16] The reactionaries wanted to re-create the age of their dreams, of national isolationism and economic individualism. It was the latter group that most interested Hofstadter, from which a line could be drawn to the political paranoia of the postwar age. He did not lament reforms.[17] Rather, Hofstadter's conservatism drove him to study those reactionaries who called for radical changes in the government. He found that for many such people it was social status that fostered resentment.

The age of reform was the time of American industry and gilded wealth followed by progressive backlash. This was a time of accelerating inequality, periods of boom and bust, and new wealth for the likes of John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Jay Gould. Labor, which had previously been marginalized by the courts and by legislation, achieved major victories after 1900.[18]

For Hofstadter, the big changes had to do with the Western frontier, agricultural life, and industrialization. New social hierarchies and a declining sense of importance among formerly prestigious groups affected political attitudes. Two groups who saw a decline in status could not have been more different: one was made up of farmers; the other was composed of old Northeast patricians, a group Hofstadter called the "imperialist elite" (1955, 91).

Farmers and the agricultural life they embodied, in the early days of the republic and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, occupied something of an exalted position in the public mind. This *agrarian myth*, as Hofstadter called it, was first promulgated by elites (e.g., Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton,

14. Hofstadter has noted, "What started me off as an historian was a sense of engagement with contemporary problems" (qtd. in Brinkley 1998, 134, and in Brown 2006, 1).

15. Hofstadter called this the "coexistence of reform and reaction" (1955, 21).

16. In a line evocative of this century's politics, Hofstadter wrote, "It is hardly an accident that the generation that wanted to bring about direct popular rule, break up the political machines, and circumvent representative government was the same generation that imposed Prohibition on the country and proposed to make the world safe for democracy" (1955, 18).

17. From the vantage point of the fifties, Hofstadter wrote, "It should now be possible to indulge in some critical comments [of the progressive tradition] without seeming to impugn its entire value" (1955, 19).

18. A brief discussion of labor's choices can be found in Williams (2016).

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and Thomas Jefferson),[19] who admired those living close to the land.[20] Such veneration became part of the public consciousness and a source of patriotism. Originating among elites, the agrarian myth did not correspond neatly with reality. Far from a simple and satisfied existence, many farmers were no different from others in adopting business practices; if they could afford it, they bought investments, often land, with the hopes of making a profit (Hofstadter 1955, 41–45). The more widely accepted the agrarian myth became, the less it seemed to correspond to reality (27–28). Unlike the founders, especially Jefferson, politicians who touted agrarian life in public did not appear to have any private interest in agriculture or self-sustaining farms. Instead, farms turned into campaign symbolism.[21] With affluence, farmers themselves steadily bought up larger plots of land, utilizing new techniques to maximize profits.[22] Their organizations, such as the American Society of Equity and the Farmers' Union, focused on issues such as production and market value (112). As a group, Hofstadter remarked, commercial farmers eventually turned their backs on poor comrades who did not make it in business, who lived at the margins, but who perhaps better symbolized that fading agrarian myth (124).

In the 1840s, the lure of economic opportunities pulled many young men from rural areas to the cities. To encourage rural youths to stay near home, farmers' groups and their publications drew on the agrarian myth, highlighting the dangers of urban areas. Having dispensed with the idea that farmers were innocent yeomen, Hofstadter attributed their response to status: "Rank in society! That was close to the heart of the matter, for the farmer was beginning to realize acutely not merely that the best of the world's goods were to be had in the cities and that the urban middle and upper classes had much more of them than he did but also that he was losing in status and respect as compared with them" (1955, 33).

It was not that they struggled, according to Hofstadter, but that the farmers had declined in social ranking. The farmers desired a return to past greatness.

19. According to Hofstadter, even Alexander Hamilton, who was generally opposed to "the agrarian interest," admitted that farmers performed a vital task for the nation. Hamilton wrote, "The cultivation of the earth, as the primary and most certain source of national supply, . . . has intrinsically a strong claim to pre-eminence over every other kind of industry" (qtd. in Hofstadter 1955, 27). For Hofstadter, the founders all shared the agrarian myth in some way, however unevenly.

20. The founders' view of agrarian life was contradictory, summarized by Hofstadter this way: "The United States was the only country in the world that began with perfection and aspired to progress" (1955, 36).

21. See, e.g., Hofstadter's description of Calvin Coolidge, standing on a farm, in fancy clothes, with a secret service agent in the background getting ready to move the president off to the next stop (1955, 31).

22. If Leon Fink (2015) is right, capitalism was the true American ideology. Thus, we should perhaps expect nothing less than an acquisitive practice covered by yeoman rhetoric.

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Many turned to the ideology of populism, symbolized by the Populist Party of the 1890s. Although primarily an agricultural party, in adopting a critical stance toward industrial capitalism, the Populists drew support from urban workers as well as rural farmers.[23] Among the populist tendencies were yearning for a prior golden age of society; conceptualizing their struggle in dualistic terms, often involving international bankers; and, most significantly (encapsulating the other two), the belief in history as a conspiracy (Hofstadter 1955, 62). In Hofstadter's interpretation, the populists tended to "account for relatively impersonal events in highly personal terms" (73). They thought that history, at least since the Civil War, was made up of urban villains who conspired against virtuous rural folk. Notable instances of corruption and bribery fed this impression, lending necessary elements of truth to a deception. Their narrative equated *conspiracies-in-history* with *history-as-conspiracy* (70–71).

In the 1890s, on the verge of resurgence in status and political power, the farmers' collective psychological condition was closer to that of the patrician class than to urban workers. The old imperialist elite, which included figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Hay, and Henry Cabot Lodge, saw an alignment of interests with the farmers (Hofstadter 1955, 91–93). Though he did not define the term, Hofstadter's imperialist elite cheered on America's foreign adventures, the claiming of territory and the expansion of international markets. According to Hofstadter, both the imperialist elite and the farmers "had been bypassed and humiliated by the advance of industrialism, and both were rebelling against the domination of the country by industrial and financial capitalists" (93). The age of industry inaugurated new power brokers in trade and banking, which the imperialist elite railed against. And, Hofstadter explained, they were ready to go to war if they could "unseat or even embarrass the moneyed powers" (93). Their imperial attitudes did not alienate too many populists, who were nominally against war but whose true stance was one of ambivalence. They were more against the military as an institution than its deployment, and more against cooperating with European nations than against fighting. Moreover, they drew a distinction between wars of aggression and wars of humanitarianism, a line so fuzzy that one could easily manage a shift in principles if it served political interests (85–87).

Like the populists, the imperialist elite spoke in terms of fairness against growing concentrations of wealth, though what they really hated was a loss of importance. Hofstadter wrote with dramatic flair: "In a strictly economic sense these men were not growing poorer as a class, but their wealth and power were being

23. Hofstadter explained, "The Populists had appealed in a rather touching way to the principle of universality: they were working, they liked to think, for the interests of *all* toilers and certainly all farmers" (1955, 123; emphasis in the original).

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dwarfed by comparison with the new eminences of wealth and power. They were less important, and they knew it" (1955, 137).

Hofstadter judged resentment, among both farmers and the imperialist elite, to be founded almost exclusively on a loss of social status, not a loss of livelihood or fears about material well-being. Longing for past greatness and irritated at those who had passed them by, the imperialist elite appealed to a national sense of virtue. Though they spoke about the "common man" and the "man on the street," those who took up the emerging progressive cause were not oriented to the poor farmer or industrial worker (Hofstadter 1955, 173). Theodore Roosevelt, for example, held socialist labor organizations at a distance, preferring to placate with regulations rather than taking an anti-capital or anti-market stance.[24]

Hofstadter thus distinguished resentment held by poor agrarian laborers and lower-class workers from the resentment held by professionals, many farmers, and patricians in higher-class positions. All, to some degree or another, had historical-cultural anxieties. But whereas movements during times of affluence were about "status," movements in times of depression had an economic program. This was a crucial difference for Hofstadter, even when lower-class resentment manifested on the far right.

In the essay "Pseudo-conservatism Revisited," Hofstadter illustrated the class element of resentment by comparing Coughlinism of the 1930s and McCarthyism of the 1950s (1996c). Father Coughlin and Senator McCarthy both appealed to Irish Catholics, Eastern European immigrants, those with lower education levels, Republicans, and some elderly populations. Yet Coughlinism was a fundamentally economic movement that, Hofstadter wrote, drew "its support from those who suffered most from bad times" (68). Drawing support from unemployed workers, poor farmers, and others worried about their future, Coughlinism blamed bankers and the international lending system in intensely anti-Semitic rhetoric. Though characteristics of Coughlinism were exhibitions of political paranoia, for Hofstadter, its "tone was more pseudo-radical than pseudo-conservative" (68). In being economically motivated, Coughlinism died during the New Deal.[25] Coughlin's anti-capitalism and anti-Communism was, by the late thirties, increasingly perceived as an ideological haven for Nazis (Kazin 1995, 131).

The rise of McCarthyism, however, was for Hofstadter a continuation of that older, reactionary status politics. It did not appeal to personal finances and

24. Hofstadter wrote, "When the Socialist said the grievance of the people could be relieved only under Socialism, the typical Progressive became the more determined to find ways of showing that these grievances were remediable under capitalism" (1955, 240).

25. Coughlin ended his radio program and periodical at the request of the archbishop of Detroit, in 1941 (Kazin 1995, 132).

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had no economic plan. Although it drafted some support among lower classes, it was primarily a middle- and upper-class phenomenon. At his peak, McCarthy had the support of over half the American public (Hofstadter 1996c, 70). In place of being anti–African American and anti-Semitic, the preferred scapegoats for pseudoconservatives of the forties, McCarthyism was anti-Communist and anti-intellectual—a change Hofstadter interpreted as a sign of rising affluence among the prejudiced (1996d, 60). Still, while McCarthyism may have found new scapegoats, the practice of social blaming remained consistent. Moreover, vigilant McCarthyites followed strategies of their pseudoconservative predecessors, accusing fellow conservatives of disloyalty as a way to reassert their social standing in a new historical epoch.

Hofstadter considered the economic situation a straightforward way to distinguish between the two types of political paranoia, one motivated by economic resentment and the other by status resentment. He thought that *interest politics* (regarding competing "material aims") dominated during times of economic contraction and that *status politics* would become prominent during times of economic expansion.[26] It was important to draw such distinctions for two reasons: movements derived from economic resentment declined with a rising economy, and, at least in the modern world, movements derived from status resentment were recurring social phenomena.

HOFSTADTER IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Far from limited to the postwar age, political paranoia for Hofstadter was a function of modernity. Yet to what extent do his accounts of the paranoid style and resentment align with the twenty-first century? One might expect a degree of continuity given advances in communications technology, which Hofstadter regarded as a tool to "keep the mass man in an almost constant state of political mobilization" (1996d, 63). Indeed, for today's paranoid spokesperson, the list of subversive elements in our midst is only rivaled by the volume of books, radio programs, and YouTube channels dedicated to sounding the alarm. According to today's pseudoconservatives, one must be vigilant of treasonous actors: the Kenyan-born ex-president, who tried to implement socialism; Hillary Clinton

26. Hofstadter wrote, "We have, at all times, two kinds of processes going on in inextricable connection with each other: *interest politics*, the clash of material aims and needs among various groups and blocs; and *status politics*, the clash of various projective rationalizations arising from status aspirations and other personal motives. In times of depression and economic discontent—and by and large in times of acute national emergency—politics is more clearly a matter of interests, although of course status considerations are still present. In times of prosperity and general well-being on the material plane, status considerations among the masses can become much more influential in our politics" (1996d, 53; emphasis in the original).

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and the Democratic Party; scientists, especially global warming alarmists; gun control advocates, who wish to undo the Second Amendment; minorities and their organizations, such as Black Lives Matter; and immigrants of all types (Neiwert 2017, 33–34). Thus, some comparison between Hofstadter's time and today may be warranted, if only to draw the most general similarities and contrasts, first regarding the paranoid spokesperson and second on the role of resentment in American politics.

Paranoid rhetoric of the twenty-first century is remarkably consistent with that of the 1950s. Many figures within the Trump administration have made public remarks in line with Hofstadter's descriptions of the paranoid style. In fact, many of Trump's own statements, as a candidate and as president, are apocalyptic, uncompromising, and conspiratorial. One study analyzing Trump's speeches found a pattern: first, the invocation of events (often about China or Mexico) associated with feelings of national shame; second, the channeling of anger toward political elites; and finally, the promise of recovery under Trump's leadership (Schrock et al. 2017). Trump's speeches stressed language of "losing," being a "country that doesn't win anymore" in global trade or military engagements, being a nation in "bad shape" or "trouble," and being the butt of jokes among other nations (7–8). To lay blame, Trump scapegoated a wide range of groups, all portrayed as outsiders (an Other, lacking in Americanness). Among his most frequent targets included elites, immigrants, and environmentalists, along with Muslims, Mexicans, and African Americans.[27]

Textual analysis may help compare Hofstadter's time to the present. This discussion will focus on a government document, entitled "POTUS & Political Warfare," that portrayed President Trump's domestic enemies as threats to national security.[28] Its author, Rich Higgins, was later forced out of the National

27. By "scapegoating," I mean the spurious attribution of a national problem to a specific group, often in a way that influences others. One representative example took place at a campaign event in September 2016, when candidate Trump took a question about the problem of Muslims in the United States and about Obama's apparent identity as both Muslim and a foreigner. Rather than dispute its premise, Trump said, "We need this question," acknowledging that "bad things are happening" (Neiwert 2017, 274). Another illustration of scapegoating happened in November 2015 and January 2016, when Trump retweeted two postings from white supremacist accounts. In one of them, Trump supported the incorrect claim that 81% of white homicides were committed by blacks. In response, white supremacists tweeted that Trump had sent them a sign: two retweets, they thought, could hardly be accidental (278). A third example occurred during the campaign kickoff, when Trump announced that immigrants from Mexico were rapists who imported drugs and crime (though "some," he assumed, were "good people"; qtd. in DelReal 2015). For other examples, including Trump's scapegoating of elites, immigrants, and environmentalists, see Schrock et al. (2017, 11, 13, and 14).

28. Hereafter cited as "POTUS & Political Warfare," the document is dated March 2017, and authorship in media reports is attributed to Rich Higgins (Davis 2017). The piece is available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/10/heres-the-memo-that-blew-up-the-nsc/.

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Security Council and the White House. The document nonetheless is a remarkably high ranking expression of political paranoia.

Much like the style espoused by Hofstadter, this document expresses conflict in apocalyptic terms. Despite Trump's position of power, the piece maintains a deeply pessimistic attitude, as if opponents were on the verge of winning: "In the same way President Lincoln was surrounded by political opposition both inside and outside of his wire, in both overt and covert forms, so too is President Trump. Had Lincoln failed, so too would have the Republic." Here, too, the threat comes from nearly every direction, inside and outside of government, including the mainstream media, universities, the deep state, globalists, bankers, Islamists, and establishment Republicans. Such groups, it claims, are pushing political correctness and cultural Marxism. Some of the establishment Republicans participate in this scheme unknowingly, but because "Trump publicly exposed them for their duplicitous activities," they should be treated as "bitter foes" ("POTUS & Political Warfare" 2017, 7, 2).

"POTUS & Political Warfare" also warns that the struggle is a battle for information. This "Battlespace" appears to be one of its major concerns:

> These attack narratives are pervasive, full spectrum and institutionalized at all levels. They operate in social media, television, the 24-hour news cycle in all media, and they are entrenched at the upper levels of the bureaucracies and within the foreign policy establishment. They inform the entertainment industry from late night monologues, to situation comedies, to television series memes, to movie themes. The effort required to direct this capacity at President Trump is little more than a programming decision to do so. The cultural Marxist narrative is fully deployed, pervasive, full spectrum and ongoing. Regarding the president, attacks have become a relentless 24/7 effort. ("POTUS & Political Warfare" 2017, 5)

According to the argument, cultural Marxist narratives were spread through a dangerous and pervasive media machine. Such narratives are also spread covertly, using propaganda and something called "infiltration and subversion" (5). Such a campaign of information warfare forms a "pseudo-reality" for the public, constantly reinforcing false "meta narratives" that President Trump is "illegitimate," "corrupt," "dishonest," and "treasonous" (6). (In a clever twist, by warning of a "pseudo-reality," the narrative preempts accusations of being "pseudo-conservative.")

As expected from Hofstadter's description, the argument is enthusiastically pursued. The discussion begins in the real world, with a legitimate (or at least arguable) commentary on political discourse today: on unfair attacks on President Donald Trump, and on political correctness leading to a decline in critical

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thinking. But the narrative rapidly shifts to a fantasy world about a "cabal" intent on implementing "cultural Marxism" ("POTUS & Political Warfare" 2017, 1). Here, too, the goal is to associate unrelated concepts: in this case, that cultural Marxism is a logical consequence of political correctness. However, the pace of the argument appears faster than the instances of the paranoid style Hofstadter had read. Ideas and groups are referenced in rapid succession, perhaps to demonstrate their similarity and cohesiveness and to portray the variety of actors that endanger the United States. The unintended effect may be that readers get lost in the shuffle of terms and ideas, none of which are explained in detail. The treatment of cultural Marxism, for example, is limited to just over half a page. A complete definition is not provided, except to say that today's cultural Marxists look to Gramsci, the Fabian Society, and the Frankfurt School. No distinction is made among types of thinkers, and the subsequent series of quotations lacks discussion (though, ironically, the next page warns of the president's adversaries presenting "facts without context"; 4–5).

Furthermore, in scholarly tone and documentation, "POTUS & Political Warfare" does not appear to match the writings Hofstadter analyzed. Its lack of polish makes it unlike other government documents. Still, the choice of terminology and prose appears to be a strategic decision, apparently to convey that the author is properly informed (one of the tribe, so to speak). Whereas Hofstadter found that rhetoricians emulated those they criticized, such as various intellectuals, today's paranoid style seeks exclusivity, to speak only to fellow citizens who are in the know. In "POTUS & Political Warfare," the meanings of "cultural Marxism," "Islam," and "left wing" are not obvious, even when defined. One must know the lexicon to follow the argument.

Overall, "POTUS & Political Warfare" follows a similar strategy to that which Hofstadter noted 6 decades ago. It is nevertheless curious that the document was written for an internal audience. Hofstadter never clarified whether the paranoid spokesman believed what he promoted, but Higgins appears to have been sincere: in sharing the document, itself an act of political warfare, he ultimately triggered his downfall.

It is impossible to know whether Hofstadter would have been surprised to see the paranoid style practiced in the West Wing, but, at least from the standpoint of the sixties, he would certainly have been surprised by the way Trumpism caught on in the public's imagination. According to Hofstadter, interest politics tend to dominate during tough economic times, and status politics tend to dominate during prosperous times. Is Trumpism an expression of economic resentment or status resentment? Is he a pseudoradical or pseudoconservative? On the one hand, Trump channeled economic discontent of the working class (Schrock et al. 2017). On the other hand, 2016 was not 1932; the Obama presidency was a time of slow recovery (albeit not the New Deal reborn). Political paranoia

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of the twenty-first century is a complex combination of status resentment and economic resentment that does not neatly adhere to Hofstadter's categories.

Still, Trump's appeals to low- and high-status voters proved not only electorally effective but also ideologically coherent. Trump, likely unaware of the latter, perceived what audiences wanted to hear. His inconsistencies (even those statements that were demonstrably untrue) aligned with part of the conservative worldview. As Corey Robin notes, Trump unwittingly appeals to those skeptical of "simpleminded rationalism": the belief that logic and reason—driven by data, deployed in bursts—could govern political and social behavior (2018, 239). Instead, the conservative is drawn to a sense of order created by layers of political authority, administered according to tradition. Trump's "indifference to consistency," Robin concludes, "is part of his appeal on the right" (240).

Furthermore, the rhetoric of Trumpism is much closer to McCarthy than Coughlin. Coughlinism and Trumpism share a common criticism of international financial elites, but the latter is considerably more class inclusive in its scapegoating. Trumpism opposes elites—intellectuals, liberals, government insiders, in addition to bankers—as well as potential lower-class subversives, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities. And, as Schrock et al. (2017) point out, Trump avoided laying blame on corporations. At one campaign stop in Springfield, Ohio, he called out politicians who negotiated free trade agreements, but not the corporations that took advantage of unrestricted trade: "Remember, every time you see a closed factory or wiped out community in Ohio, it was essentially caused by the Clintons. . . . We've lost 70,000 factories since China entered the World Trade Organization. Another Bill and Hillary backed disaster" (qtd. in Schrock et al. 2017, 11). If Trump were pseudoradical, we would expect a recurring narrative against banking and corporate elites, rather than a catchall pseudoconservative narrative against all manner of supposedly anti-American entities.

Two trends—one related to the structure of the world economy, the other to the ideology of development—may account for the complex formations of resentment within Trumpism. The world economy over the prior 4 decades experienced slower overall growth than in the postwar age (Brenner 2006). Slower growth in the advanced zones of the world resulted in increasing inequality, with faster rates in the capital sector, broadly defined.[29] Despite stock market growth, this was accompanied by stagnated wages and declining trade unions.[30] The twenty-first century, unlike Hofstadter's postwar milieu, is several decades removed from the last historical condition of true "affluence." In

29. By "capital," I mean things like investment wealth, interest, and rents (Piketty 2014, 25).
30. See "Rank and File" (2016), a special issue of *Jacobin*.

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an age when there is neither crisis nor affluence, status resentments may resurface periodically.

A second explanation may be more compelling: unlike Coughlin, Trump pointed to real issues of distress regarding the American worker. In fact, Trump and Bernie Sanders advanced similar criticisms of neoliberalism, a bipartisan ideology supportive of free trade agreements and reduced domestic social spending. However, more than mere government cutbacks, neoliberalism was the sentiment that human freedom was the same as market freedom; thus, it was up to the individual to make a life for him- or herself (Harvey 2005; Prashad 2012). Trump's protectionist promises, albeit construed in anti-immigrant language, were welcome news for those suffering economically.[31]

To the extent that it appeals to the delusional mind, Trumpism is an ideology of status resentment. To the extent that it appeals to material suffering caused by elites, Trumpism is an ideology of economic resentment. Though not identified by Hofstadter, this complex arrangement is perhaps to be expected. Max Weber famously distinguished between class, as defined by market success, and status, as defined by honorific position. Status can be represented by ethnicity, achievements (such as knighthood), occupation, or—as an extension of class position—life practices, such as style of dress, culinary tastes, or artistic practices. Weber considered status to be different from class in that economic power, by itself, was not an honorific position, writing, "Quite generally, 'mere economic' power, and especially 'naked' money power, is by no means a recognized basis of social honor" (1946, 180). Nevertheless, the consumption of goods may quickly convert high-class rank to high-status rank. In short, just as the notions of class and status are not simple binaries, neither are the political phenomena arising from feelings of economic or social resentment.[32]

CONCLUSION

The return of Richard Hofstadter, if he indeed ever went away, coincides with great unease about the future. It is no surprise that academics and public intellectuals grapple with his ideas, drawing connections to the present. Yet it is also worth remembering Hofstadter's own journey, moving away from radicalism, and allowing himself to be influenced by intellectuals across the ideological spectrum.

31. Some commentators incorrectly assumed Trump's popularity to dwindle after appointing billionaires to his cabinet and implementing a tax cut for the wealthy. It did not. As Amy Chua (2018) points out, Trump's appeal is in part that he eschews elite cultural and culinary tastes. The notion of cognitive shortcuts was pioneered by Popkin (1994).

32. See the discussion between Wolfgang Streeck, who believed that Trump converted class concerns into status politics, and Christopher Prendergast, who thought that the two concepts were more interrelated (Streeck and Prendergast 2017).

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In being a syncretic thinker, Hofstadter was not unlike the anti-populist newspaper editor William Allen White, who later took up the progressive cause. White's 1896 editorial—"What's the Matter with Kansas?"—took populists to task for perceived indulgences, for legislating "the thriftless man into ease."[33] He later remarked on his change of heart. After being "bit" by Theodore Roosevelt, White "went mad" and took up the progressive cause (qtd. in Smith 2011).[34] In referencing White's editorial, Hofstadter (1955, 131–33) may have contemplated his own ideological journey, albeit in the opposite direction.

Shifting allegiances may also be in store for President Trump's supporters, many of whom were motivated by economic distress, not merely feelings of being passed by in the social hierarchy. While the paranoid style of today follows a similar model to that described by Hofstadter, the causes of public resentment have altered. If Trumpism is any sign of the populist movements to come, mass resentment can no longer be predicted along economic lines. The populists of the present mix material concerns with status resentments. Far from being in decline, populism appears stronger than ever. Given that Far Right populism has captured the White House, however, pseudoconservatives may be correct in portraying the conflict in such apocalyptic terms.

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33. Originally published by the *Emporia Gazette*, White's newspaper, the article can now be accessed on the Kansas Historical Society's website: https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/what-s-the-matter-with-kansas/16717.

34. For more on White's life, see Smith (2005).

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