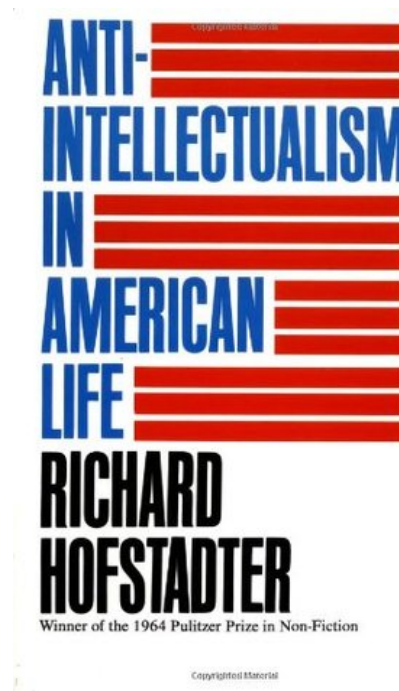




Anti-Intellectualism in American Life

Richard Hofstadter

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Anti-intellectualism in American Life was awarded the 1964 Pulitzer Prize in Non-Fiction. It is a book which throws light on many features of the American character. Its concern is not merely to portray the scorn of intellect in American life, but to say something about what the intellectual is, and can be, as a force in a democratic society.

Hofstadter set out to trace the social movements that altered the role of intellect in American society from a virtue to a vice. In so doing, he explored questions regarding the purpose of education and whether the democratization of education altered that purpose and reshaped its form.

In considering the historic tension between access to education and excellence in education, Hofstadter argued that both anti-intellectualism and utilitarianism were consequences, in part, of the democratization of knowledge.

Moreover, he saw these themes as historically embedded in America's national fabric, an outcome of her colonial European and evangelical Protestant heritage. Anti-intellectualism and utilitarianism were functions of American cultural heritage, not necessarily of democracy.

Anti-Intellectualism in American Life Details

Date : Published 1964 by Random House, Inc. (first published February 12th 1963)

ISBN : 9780394703176

Author : Richard Hofstadter

Format : Paperback 434 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Politics, Sociology, Philosophy, North American Hi..., American History, Education

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From Reader Review Anti-Intellectualism in American Life for online ebook

Jay Roberts, CFP®, CRPC ® says

Written in 1964, this book outlines the history of anti-intellectualism in our nation. Because the book was written almost 50 years ago, it delves deeper into the subject matter than most contemporary work. This book has become a cornerstone work on the subject, and is a must read for anyone interested in the subject matter. Sadly, the same problems that existed at the time of this work still have not been addressed today. The author could not have imagined the propaganda machines that political machines would create to perpetuate the anti-intellectual fever in America. Sadly again, the later part of the book focuses on reformation of the education system, something that never truly took place. We are suffering for it to this day, to be honest. And the history presented shows that America will continue to deal with bias against some of the most intelligent member of society for many years to come. This is just a reality we must deal with. As for the book itself, it starts out strongly, yet begins to drift near the end. The latter part, as mentioned, focuses on reformation. This subject does not jive with the current realities, making it difficult for today's reader to fully connect.

Sunny says

Another game changer. I loved some of the ideas that this book brought out on intellectualism and anti-intellectualism at the same time. The book is essentially a study of the rampant anti-intellectualism that is strife in America today and as it was in 1962 when Richard wrote this book. You could say the same about most of the countries that are just slaves to the Benjamin's, fast cars, big houses and other supra-chavvy desires and whimsical whims! The book talks about the foundation of America and how intellectual the founding fathers of America were and how they must be flipping from side to side in their graves if they are looking down at that mutation Trump at the helm(et) in American today! As I have said many times before I love books that take my mind to walks along paths and directions that I just would not have been led before and this book takes you on many many walks ...

One of the most acutest points in the book for me was the difference between intelligence and intellect. Richard seemed to imply overall that intelligence is intelligence inside a system and cognition of all the assumptions that come within that system. Intellectualism is a form of intelligence that sits outside that system and has the ability to look at the "system" from a distance and questions those assumptions. Richard words this more eloquently when he says that (and this is the key theme in the book): "intelligence will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it. Intellect evaluates evaluations and looks for the meanings of situations as a whole."

Here were some of my favourite bits:

- "Thomas Colley Grattan a British traveller observed of young American businessmen: "they follow business like drudges and politics with fierce ardour. They marry. They renounce party going. They give up all pretension in dress. They cannot force wrinkles and crow's feet on their faces but they assume and soon acquire a pursed up, keen and haggard look. Their air, manner and conversation are alike contracted. They have no breadth either of shoulders, information or ambition. Their physical powers are subdued and their mental capability crammed into narrow limits. There is constant activity going on in one small portion of the brain; all the rest is stagnant. The money making faculty is alone cultivated. They are incapable of acquiring knowledge on a broad or a liberal scale. All is confined to trade, finance, law, and small, local provincial information; art, science, literature are nearly dead letters to them."
- "Tayler Lewis objected that American boasted of its individualism while encouraging mediocre sameness in its utilitarian education. (WOW WHAT A LINE!!) When may we look less of true originality he asked than at a time when every child is taught to repeat this inane self-laudation and all distinction of individual

thought is lost because no man has room for anything else than a barren idea of progress, a contempt for the past and a blinding reverence for an unknown future?"

- "The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not to fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is. That is what I want to preserve, or rather... recover"
- "Since the time of Tocqueville it has become a commonplace among students of American that business activism has provided an overwhelming counterpoise to reflection in this country. Tocqueville saw that the life of constant action and decision which was enabled by the democratic and business-like character of American life put a premium upon rough and ready habits of mind, quick decisions and the prompt seizure of opportunities and all these activities were not propitious for deliberation, elaboration or precision in thought. "Anti-intellectualism Schlesinger remarked has long been the anti-Semitism of the businessman."
- "Brooks exposed what seemed to the terrible truth about a race that has never cultivated life for its own sake. From the beginning he thought the American mind caught between the hopeless imperatives of the puritan code and the stark realities of business self-assertion had developed a kind of unwholesome doubleness that militated against the creation or at least the fulfilment of first rate artists and thinkers. It had forged on the one side a wild of ideals and abstractions uncommitted to any reality and on the other a world of possession the soulless accumulation of dollars; caught between them was a thinking class that passed at a frightening pace from youth to middle age and the to slow relentless decay. A country whose life was in a state of arrested development a national mind that has been sealed against that experience from which literature derives all its values had given rise to a gallery of wasted deformed and unrealized truths."
- "Once great men created fortunes; today a great system creates fortunate men"
- "You can stick a public school and a university in the middle of every block of every city in America and you will never keep America from rotting morally by mere intellectual education." - wow what a massive castigating statement ... is Richard American even???? !!!!
- "The professional man (businessman) lives off ideas not for them".
- "There has always been in our national experience a type of mind which elevates hatred to a kind of creed; for this mind, group hatreds take a place in politics similar to the class struggle in some other modern societies. Filled with obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations, with elaborate hallucinations about secrets and conspiracies, groups of malcontents have found scapegoats at various times in Masons or abolitionists, Catholics, Mormons, or Jews, Negroes, or immigrants, the liquor interests or the international bankers. In the succession of scapegoats chosen by the followers of this tradition of Know-Nothings, the intelligentsia have at last in our time found a place."
- "The original American hope for the world in so far as the older American thought about the world at all was that it might save itself by emulating the American system that is by dropping formal ideologies, accepting our type of democracy, apply itself to work and the arduous pursuit of happiness and by following the dictates of common sense. The irony is that Americans now suffer as much from the victory as from the defeat of their aspirations. What is it that has taken root in the world if it is not the spirit of American activism, the belief that life can be made better, that colonial peoples can free themselves as the Americans did, that poverty and oppression do not have to be endured, that backward countries can become industrialised and enjoy a high standard of living and that the pursuit of happiness is everybody's business."
- Moses Coit Taylor said that "in its inception New England was not an agricultural community, more a manufacturing community not a trading community: it was a thinking community an arena and mart for ideas; its characteristic organ be in not the hand not the heart nor the pocket but the brain. .. Probably no other community of pioneers ever so honoured study, so revered the symbols and instruments of learning. Theirs was a social structure with its corner stone resting on a book only six years after John Winthrop's arrival in Salem Harbour the people of Massachusetts took from their own treasury the fund from which to found a university; so that while the tree stumps were as yet scarcely weather browned in their earliest harvest fields and before the nightly howl of the wolf had ceased from the outskirts of the village, they had made arrangements by which even in that wilderness their young men could at once enter upon the study of

Aristotle, and Thucydides of Horace and Tacitus and the Hebrew Bible ... the leader class was indeed an order of nobility among them.”

- “The mind is also a threat for marriage, because introversion undermines marital happiness. Divorced people turn out to have more intellectual interests than happily married people. A liking for philosophy, psychology, and radical politics and for reading the new republic are much less auspicious for marital bliss than a liking for YMCA work, bible study and the American magazine.”
 - “One realizes that that new education if indeed trying to educate the whole child in that it is trying to shape the character and the personality of its charges and that what it aims to do is not primarily to fit them to become a disciplined part of the world of production and competition, ambition and vocation, creativity and analytical thought but rather to help them learn the ways of the world of consumption and hobbies of enjoyment and social complaisance, in short to adapt gracefully to the passive and hedonistic styles summed up in the significant term: ADJUSTMENT.”
 - “The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education.”
 - “The more one looks at great examples of creativity the more evident it becomes that creative minds are not typically nice or well-adjusted or accommodating or moderate that genius is often accompanied by some kind of personal disorder and that society must come to terms with this disorder if it wishes to have the benefit of the genius.”
-

J. Dunn says

I couldn't finish this the first time I tried. Just wasn't in the mood at the time. I thought it would be kind of interesting reading on whacked out stuff like the Know-Nothings, the KKK, nativism, the Birchers, and so on, but it turns out it's mostly about the influence of Evangelicals on our politics and culture throughout American history. And I thought I wanted to know more about that too, but it turned out to be pretty boring in practice, so I dropped it, for now. I'll finish eventually, because it feels like stuff I ought to know, in the light of current events.

I ended up finishing this up a couple of years later. It was mostly good, but what he groups under anti-intellectualism gets a little too broad for my liking. I mean, that's the thesis and what the book is setting out to do, and most of it probably does count as anti-intellectual under a strict definition of the term, but it sort of rankled to see any form of populism or attempts at democratic participation in institutions getting lumped in with Bircher loons. I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean to make those equivalencies, but it's sort of a problem with the project. When you start to make progressive and non-canon education look like it's somewhere on a continuum with Bircher wingnuttiness, something has gone wrong, category-wise. All that might fall under the rubrik of "anti-intellectual," but that's putting forward an awfully narrow and conservative idea of what "intellectual" is. Plenty of credible intellectuals were for the educational ideas and some of the other demopopulist social trends he covers, whereas you can't find many if any who were for the loonier stuff.

I dunno, maybe I just had the wrong idea about what this book was setting out to do to begin with, as, like I said above, I thought it was going to focus much more on the really nasty nativist, racist, patriarchal, etc strands of American anti-intellectualism than it did.

Mehrsa says

Essential reading that has not aged at all. There was so much here--commentary, history, and well written analysis of current events. Though the current events are now history, it was still totally relevant. This is a must read.

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

Continuing my winding journey looking at conspiracy theories and the culture that spawns and supports them, I came across this gem from Hofstadter regarding the anti-intellectualism of the United States from the first colonizers to the 1950's. Awesome piece of scholarship and very in depth. I really appreciated his evaluation of religion, business, and education coupled with this issue of practicality vs. intellectuality. Superb. Long. A little dry in places. But all in all, a worthy study to check out.

Bill Kerwin says

This Pulitzer Prize winner had long been on my to-read list, but when Sarah Palin became a vice presidential candidate, I moved it to the short list and read it. Now that Trump, that "stable genius," has become the president, maybe I should read it again.

What this book shows us is that anti-intellectualism in America has been around a long time. A generation before the Revolution, American revivalist preachers were already denigrating the university-educated ministers of the New England mainstream as over-intellectualized and therefore closed off to divine inspiration, and in politics the ridicule of the intellectual as too impractical a person to be trusted with the public good goes back to Jefferson at least. The exultation of the common man ("vote for the guy you'd like to have a beer with") got considerably worse with the Jackson presidency, and by 1840, during William Henry Harrison's "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign, it officially became the keystone of a party's election strategy. Hofstadter doesn't stop there, but goes on to show how this bias against the intellectual is a strain going through every aspect of American life, including agriculture, business, labor organization and even education itself.

Hofstadter writes in a clear accessible style, and--although the book is more than forty-five years old--it still has a lot to say to us about politics today. (Just ask Louie Gohmert. He'll tell you.)

Max says

Hofstadter explores the development of the American bias against intellectuals. The intellectual is seen as wordy, conceited, pretentious, addled by over-examination of issues, contemptuous of practical men, a bleeding heart, and an outlier who defies faith, morality and egalitarianism. Hofstadter distinguishes between being intellectual and just being intelligent. Intelligent individuals place a higher value on useful and practical knowledge, they search for answers. The intellectual turns answers into more questions. The intelligent person has clear goals that can easily be appreciated by anyone. The intellectual is critical, creative and contemplative. He examines, ponders, wonders, imagines whereas the intelligent man grasps, manipulates and creates order. An animal can be intelligent, but intellect is human. Hofstadter traces the evolution of this bias in four sources: religion, politics, business and education.

RELIGION:

America was populated by religious dissidents who rejected the oppressiveness and decadence of European

society. Escaping from aristocracy and a highly educated strictly structured clergy, evangelicals became firmly established in America. Primitivism, the favoring of intuition and faith over cultivated rationality, was seen as natural, intellectualism as artificial. The evangelical spirit embraced emotion, the heart over the mind, getting the Bible directly over stilted interpretations.

By the 1720's, traditional Congregational and Presbyterian religions were losing meaning for frontier people and the less educated. The Great Awakening addressed this with revivalist preachers who emphasized the spirit over knowledge, the Bible over academic books. Revivalists competed with the established clergy and questioned the need for education, except to teach their particular religion. The Great Awakening marked the end of the Puritan age and the beginning of the evangelical. German Pietism and English Methodism were similar movements overseas.

By the 1790's Americans were widely dispersed and the vast majority did not belong to a church. This provided fertile ground for preachers to establish new denominations that appealed to simple folk. Success depended on skilled recruiting and religion that was readily accessible. In early 19th century a second wave of evangelicalism changed Protestantism in America. At the time of the Revolution, most Protestants belonged to one of three established religions: Congregational, Presbyterian or Anglican. By 1850 evangelical Baptists and Methodists accounted for 70% of Protestants. The Methodists went from a few thousand American members in 1775 to more than a million and a half by 1855 becoming the largest single denomination. Methodist circuit riders took the word to the people and converted them. The Baptists less organized, less educated and somewhat less effective used similar tactics.

With industrialization and urbanization, revivalist preachers refined their pitch for large crowds, filling auditoriums and playing up to prominent business leaders for recognition and financing. Dwight Moody led this movement in the late 19th century and Billy Sunday in the early 20th. With modernism encroaching dramatically in the 1920's the fundamentalist outcry went to new levels of passion. The "village Protestant individualist culture" of the 19th century had to confront relativity in morals, open sexuality, racial equality, Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, and Keynesianism in the 20th.

POLITICS:

In politics egalitarianism worked to the detriment of intellectuals. From Washington through the John Quincy Adams administration, men of learning and accomplishment were sought for government work. But with Jackson, such criteria were anathema. The common man was wanted with moral fiber being deemed more important than knowledge. In the minds of Jacksonians one excluded the other. Party and personal loyalty became the singular criterion. Congress became increasingly vitriolic and sharply divided.

Lincoln's administration was a brief exception. From humble origins as President he selected learned men for his cabinet and his advisers. After the war government quickly reverted to strict patronage. The cultured class was out. Intellectuals became reformers and as such were stigmatized as effeminate and incapable of dealing with the tough real world. Not until TR would this image change. His persona empowered progressives. Highly educated and intellectually accomplished, he also was a big game hunter, a Rough Rider, a rancher, a man's man. Thus he was popular and his reforms were taken seriously. He brought in a host of talented educated men to his administration. His successor, Taft, quickly dropped TR's reforms.

Wilson was an academic but still grounded in the Gilded Age. As President he did not fully embrace progressive issues and their intellectual proponents. He was a colonialist, opposed to minority and women's rights. His objection to big business was more to help small business than the working man. The Great Depression empowered FDR to fully embrace academia to solve the nation's problems. However attacks on intellectuals steadily mounted through his administration interrupted by WWII. Afterwards years of pent up resentment by the right wing exploded in the form of McCarthyism targeting not just communists and fellow travelers but all intellectuals, New Dealers and liberals. The decisive defeat of Stevenson, a complete but

likeable intellectual, and the election of Eisenhower, a connoisseur of Westerns, evidenced the change. Subsequently JFK would restore the validity of academia in government. This is where Hofstadter ends, his book published in 1963.

BUSINESS:

The growth of business in America diminished the intellectual. It extolled the practical man who solves real problems, not the flighty one who doesn't have to meet a payroll. As business became more powerful this perception gained strength. It resulted in an emphasis on practical education and applied science rather than philosophy, literature and basic science. At the bottom is the idea that our needs are better met by increased consumption than a fully developed mind.

The self-made man, a phrase first used by Henry Clay in 1832, was a popular 19th century concept. Rarely true as most successful people started with considerable advantages. This concept was a more reasonable notion when college education consisted of Greek, Latin and the classics and business practices were simple. After America became industrialized and business more complex, higher education began offering more engineering, accounting and law. Education became accepted as necessary for business, but traditional intellectual pursuits were still considered irrelevant.

EDUCATION:

Schools in America originally conformed to European standards as a way to prepare the upper classes for further academic studies. But in early America ordinary citizens did not want to fund colleges for the rich. Most communities would only pay the lowest possible salary for teachers for the most rudimentary education. Through the 19th and into the 20th century schools became increasingly seen as a way to learn skills necessary to make a livelihood and participate in democracy, while support for more academic education continued to erode.

By the end of WWII still only 4 in 10 graduated from high school. Many education experts felt that 60% of students could not benefit from an academic or even a high level vocational education. This was the advent of the Life-adjustment movement among educators and saw the introduction of socially oriented classes aimed at everyday living activities. Relying on interpretations of tests and IQ that were highly questionable, these educators determined that the minds of 60% of the people could not be developed beyond a minimal level. The author attributes much of this movement to a bias against intellectualism, the perception that it was not egalitarian and thus un-American, that somehow it was wrong for the average person to try to raise himself above his peers in intellectual pursuits. In the 1950's this movement lost steam as parents became more highly educated themselves and wanted more for their children. Parents saw the world demanding more complex skills. The Sputnik scare helped.

CONCLUSION:

Intellectualism declined sharply in stature after its heyday in the early American Republic. The country's founders were largely well educated men of ideas that led the nation into its bold experiment. After the 1820's intellectuals lost power, became self-absorbed and reverted to their traditional role in the leisure class engendering distrust by the general population. Progressive politics in 1890 changed the intellectual. They began espousing the democratic values that were the basis for their own disdain putting themselves in an awkward situation.

During times in the 20th century when intellectuals were accepted, at least tolerated, many felt uncomfortable at no longer being alienated. Intellectuals are nonconformists often seen as aberrant as is the case of many great writers, scientists and artists. But it is these exceptional minds that offer us unique perspectives. Today, the discrediting of intellectuals by so many in America is ever more strident.

Unfortunately this is at a time when we have never been in more need of the critical examination of thought and the new ideas that intellectuals provide.

Nicole says

I never did review this, though I thought it was excellent.

The big question that has stayed with me is the question of different definitions of equality that turns up in the book, particularly in the opposition that some make between democracy and intellectualism. There's a slippage between the idea that people should have equal rights, equal opportunities, equal dignity, and the perverse notion that people are all the same. Hofstadter certainly does not say this, but he did make me think it: it's madness to claim that people are all equally intelligent, for example, or equally gifted in music or math or the high jump, or that everyone has the same temperament and values and goals.

I found myself wondering also if the lack of a really strong strain of communism in the intellectual pot of America has not deprived us, culturally and collectively, of a way to make claims for economic equality without sliding between the notions of economic class and social class. Of course, a good part of the history that Hofstadter treats here comes well before the cold war and the American witch hunts, but it does seem that since this book was published, an anti-intellectual strain that conflates fanciness of all kinds with specifically economic power has caused great damage to the quality of American life and the character of American struggles for equity, and that a knee-jerk fear of anything even vaguely socialist is preventing the disentangling of those two ideas.

Perhaps this problem becomes especially acute in higher education and that is why it strikes me as so clear: so much talk about access and equity that we've kind of left equality behind. Somehow the notion that somebody might just be better than somebody else at something, without it being a result of identity categories and power imbalances, the idea that somebody wrote a better paper because they are smarter, harder working, or just temperamentally more suited to the discipline is now anathema. My colleagues want to adopt a more American model for equity (and this despite looking at American outcomes, which frankly suck), and I, the foreigner, am the lone voice left arguing for *égalité de traitement* as a value worth keeping. I know that a great number of people have come to see this as an offensive statement, but I really do think that the most qualified person should always get the job.

Tom says

Written in the early 1960's this book has shaped my thinking like few others. Goes a long way to explain the history of intellectual life in America, examining religion, formal education, business, and politics. If we wonder why Americans seem "dumber" than ever, this book offers an argument that stands up well today. One of my all-time favorites.

Aaron says

What are the roots of stupidity in America, and how did they grow so strong?

It's a question historian Richard Hofstadter raises and answers brilliantly and unforgettably in his 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life."

Though the book was written more than three decades ago, it has lost none of its relevance to current life in America. What a prescient book. To read it is to attain a fuller understanding of the rise of modern political figures such as Sarah Palin, why our education system – particularly our high schools – are crumbling from the weight of lowered expectations and half-assed education policy, and how and why those in power tolerate intellectual freedom and creativity only to a certain extent.

Diving into religion, business, politics, psychology and higher education – among other subjects – Hofstadter shows that anti-intellectualism – very roughly put, the view that knowing how to correctly push the buttons on a dishwasher is more important than knowing how to design or manufacture one, or to explain how one works – is hardwired in American culture and life.

In Hofstadter's book, for example, you learn about the key religious zealots in the country's history who disdained books and adamantly believed that science was putting people on the path toward bad behavior.

You also learn about "one-hundred percenters," people who know all they need to know, people who don't want to hear or read another point of view, people who believe that all they need to know is what they glean from their own experience. Hofstadter illuminates: "The one-hundred percenter, who will tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism, considers his kind of committedness an evidence of toughness and masculinity."

Ring any bells? Fox News: The one-hundred percenter's cable news wet dream. George W. Bush: He doesn't read newspapers, cuz, heh heh, those are just filters. Red State America: Jesus rode dinosaurs, God loves guns and America can do no wrong.

If you're as dismayed as I am at current American dogma – and find yourself scratching your head over what went wrong – then Hofstadter's book provides a deep way of getting your mind around the whys and hows of all the stupidity on display both in our public behavior and in our mass media.

I'm still thinking about the end of Hofstadter's book. He is hopeful that liberal culture will endure despite various anti-intellectual viruses attacking it. I don't know. I hope he's right. In any case, I want to end my review with Hofstadter's hopeful outlook, because it is powerful and worth heeding as we move forward:

"Dogmatic, apocalyptic predictions about the collapses of liberal culture or the disappearance of high culture may be right or wrong; but one thing about them seems certain: they are more likely to instill self-pity and despair than the will to resist or the confidence to make the most of one's creative energies. It is possible, of course, that under modern conditions the avenues of choice are being closed, and that the culture of the future will be dominated by single-minded men of one persuasion or another. It is possible; but in so far as the weight of one's will is thrown onto the scales of history, one lives in the belief that it is not to be so."

ALLEN says

Recent political development in this country make it seem that gossip, hearsay, "alternative facts," wishful

thinking, invective, and shaming the intellectual class have become coin of the realm at the highest levels of government. Though it may seem these motives are brand-new, they are not. Richard Hofstadter's 1964 masterwork reminds us that these are enduring (though, happily, not always dominant) themes in our political discourse.

This book points backward to the formation of anti-intellectual tendencies in American history, and points to the present and future with concern. It also is a ringing endorsement of what the intellectual CAN do in our society besides just serving as scapegoat or whipping-boy. ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN AMERICAN LIFE is a book that should be read; the fact that it's now over 50 years old does not really "date" it because it does so well in spotting recurring (some may say, chronic) features of our public life.

Jonathan says

This book is not nearly as snotty as the title makes it sound. It's full of amazing unknown social history of early America and draws a startling line showing many of the ways that the unique American character was formed from the early 1600's on. And it does so largely without judgement, even though the overall thrust of the book is an argument that the disapproval of education and knowledge for their own sake tend to undermine our social structures and retard our advancement as a nation. It's a very well-written, highly readable (if sometimes dense) book and it will alter forever your perceptions of America. If that's what you're into.

Judy says

I first read this book in my Intellectual History of the United States class when I was in college a hundred years ago and I've felt the need to revisit it about every decade. In light of the level of what constitutes political, social, and cultural discourse in the United States today and out of total frustration with my college students who have emerged from schools that want them to "feel good about themselves" and have both lowered expectations and inflated grades, it was time to pull it off the bookshelf, dust it off, and give it a reread. Richard Hofstadter won the Pulitzer Prize in History for this book in 1964 and much of what he says is true today. He highlights a thread of "resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it" and traces that thread from early American history to the period in which he was writing. Hofstadter demonstrates that some social movements in the U.S. have divorced intellect from other human virtues and treated it as if it is a vice and in doing so he sees much of American history in education, politics, business, and religion as a pitting of intellect against emotion, character, practicality, and democracy. This anti-intellectualism has had a long history and staying power. It has been used to disparage individuals throughout our history such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Adlai Stevenson. And, in Hofstadter's view, it has fostered an unshakable belief in "the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish, wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati". And these attitudes have consequences. Hofstadter believes that an intellectual approach to life accepts the premise that conflict is a constant and there is a need for spirited discussion and an openness to compromise. But, again in his view, the anti-intellectual bias has produced a society that "looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and, accordingly, it scorns compromise (who would compromise with Satan?) and can tolerate no ambiguities." Sadly, this conclusion seems as current in 21st century America as it has been in our past.

Poppy says

Lots of information, lots of examples. Gives me a lot to think about, and I'm still processing what I have learned.

This will give me a good foundation in understanding similar books, written for a lay audience, and the underpinnings of some of the primary conflicts in our culture.

American politics is a struggle between people who believe that an 8th grade education should be sufficient to understand the issues facing us, and people who understand that it is not so.

American religion is a dichotomy between people who believe that understanding not only the Bible, but historical writings in religion and philosophy are important to understanding the word of God. And people who believe that faith and spirit are all you need to understand God's will, and in fact, that any study intended to instruct one in historical context will actually detract from faith and spirit.

American education has been, and continues to be, plagued by a misunderstanding of "democracy" - having high-achievers and low-achievers does not make a school undemocratic - as well as a very practical "preparation for life" curriculum which considers theory irrelevant in comparison to practice. Learning physiology, for example, has at times been considered less useful than learning how to exercise, although the latter is an extension of the former. It's not even so much that schools at varying points in the last 100 years have failed to teach students to think for themselves, it's that schools have at varying points assumed that the average student cannot think for him or herself.

Andrew says

Hofstadter's main problem, as far as I can tell, is that he doesn't have a working definition for intellectual. At some points, he's more than happy to include artists and writers in the camp of "the intellectual," but at other times, he only refers to those intellectuals working within a specifically positivist tradition. This makes a great deal of sense given the time in which the book was written, but comes off as a bit preposterous today. This, to me, makes me question the work as a text in the history of ideas.

But all of that being said, it's an entertaining romp through the history of my home country's idiocies. Back then, the Tea Partiers were called Birchers. And it turns out they had more than a few antecedents. Jerks.

Ci says

Anti-intellectualism in American Life

This book is not a militant intellectual ranting against the conventional philistines. This is an essential history of US along the strand of the uneven relationship of intellectualism and the society at large. Each segment - from politics, religion, cultural and education — is traced with the shifting or cyclical position of intellectual life.

This is a well-written, engaging account. I would recommend for anyone interested in US's history.

Here some notes —

I did not know Richard Hofstadter before reading this book, which first published in 1964, winner of the Pulitzer of that year. In the current, 2016, presidential election year, we may find poignant insights in the layout of the Primaries. As the author, a political scientist and an academic, said about Eisenhower's era: "After twenty years of Democratic rule, during which the intellectual had been in the main understood and respected, business had come back into power, bringing with it "the vulgarization which has been the almost invariable consequence of business supremacy." We are now in the general theme with some variation, this time is a loud-mouth, loud colored businessman himself.

I learnt about the difference between being "intelligent" and being "an intellectual". As the author said: "intelligence is an excellence of mind that is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range; it is a manipulative, adjustive, unfailingly practical quality— one of the most eminent and endearing of the animal virtues." An intelligent person is a practical, rational human who functions competently. However, "Intellect, on the other hand, is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind". One can not differential an intelligent man from an intellectual from the professional job they do, it is "the professional man lives off ideas, not for them.". The search of comprehension for its sake instead of looking for utility in the external world is the source of intellectuals' frayed reputation in a pragmatic society such as America.

But it is not just the businessman's irate or politicians' suspicion that drives the anti-intellectualism. The author traced the roots of America's Puritanic religious experience and the uneven relationship with the more conventional religious institution. The fundamentalistic, militant fraction of the population pits its battle in all aspects of social life with the elite, often by 20th century, the intellectuals. The fundamentalist religion with a fundamental Americanism often exhibits a mind totally committed and entirely refuse of challenge. These are what the author called "the one-hundred percent who will tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism, considers his kind of committedness an evidence of toughness and masculinity."

It is unfair to say that American is a land dominated by barbarism, but there are certain moments that one wonders about it.

Robert Owen says

I picked up this book by Richard Hofstadter because I was sick of reading about him in other books without ever having read him myself. After reading "Anti-Intellectualism in American Life" I see why this dual-Pulitzer Prize winner is so often cited. In a clear, concise, thoroughly thoughtful way, Hofstadter recounts the origins and trajectory of America's love / hate (mostly hate) relationship with the intellectual in American society.

The origins of American hostility to intellectualism has perverse origins as the Founding Fathers (and those of their social class) were all intellectuals.....individuals of means sufficient to live lives of disinterested genteel refinement....and, in establishing the American republic, were putting into practice the intellectual constructs of the Enlightenment. By the 1820's however, intellectualism had come to be so thoroughly associated with aristocracy in the newly enfranchised plebian mind that intellectualism itself became an attribute that appeared at odds with the new nation's republican ideals. The bottom line is that, as a result of instituting a new form of government that elevated Mr. Everyman to the level of theoretical peer, the legitimate wisdom and knowledge of a moneyed aristocracy was summarily rejected. Moreover, the influence of the second major contributor to pre-revolutionary thought, Puritan intellectuals, similarly waned

as the expanding nation embraced the Second Great Awakening's "damn tradition and every man is his own priest" evangelicalism that looked with suspicion on Bible book-larnin'. Hofstadter recounts an intellectually bleak 19th century America that was consumed with trade, rapid industrialization and an experimental republicanism that eschewed the "impractical" (and so, "worthless") knowledge of intellectuals in deference to the initiative and inventiveness of the self-made man. The Progressive era under Teddy Roosevelt ushered in a grudging acceptance of intellectuals as "experts" whose knowledge in an increasingly complex and dynamic world was indispensable. The era of the intellectual, which reached its zenith during the New Deal when Roosevelt's brain trust, was eclipsed during the post-war period of McCarthyism and the latent cultural belief that anyone that was too thoughtful had to be a communist. The American demand for practicality has had little patience for the idea of "knowledge for knowledge's sake" and even in the Progressive era, those calling themselves "intellectuals" were only accepted to the extent that they had unique knowledge that made them useful as "experts". As a result, Americans have historically been generally hostile and suspicious of its intellectuals, and, even when they were found to be useful, often punished them for knowing more than the people / politicians in charge.

My only criticism of the book is that in that Hofstadter wrote it in 1963, some of, what for him, contemporary examples of intellectualism now seem dated. He talks, for example, about the "beatnik" culture at some length, and goes on to discuss anti-intellectualism in then-contemporary American educational theory that has since been superseded by new follies. Yet this minor criticism aside, the book is broad in its scope and powerful in its implications.....implications (notwithstanding the demise of the beatnik) that remain relevant and important today.

Ed says

The book was largely a historical overview on the systematic repression/suppression of intellectual thought in America. And I'm using overview in a very poor way — it was excruciatingly detailed. However, it is strikingly relevant for application in our current society. Covering topics ranging from religion (which by its nature, must strangle intellectual thought to ensure the masses follow blindly), to education (where the humanities are losing funding to the strict business-applicable sciences).

The detailed historical insight was rather dense and frankly overbearing. But I certainly appreciate its necessity. America has long, deep-rooted traditions that downplay and push away intellectual thought, something that in Europe is, at least, more appreciated in an overall sense. The final chapter is nearly a call to arms, for American intellectuals to counteract the ignorance that exists within our country, and not stand for being conformed into the current American society. Unfortunately, I'm afraid this is relatively impossible, given that America is so tightly focused on the practical as opposed to the theoretical. The American Dream, after all, is economically-focused, not intellectually-focused. And while I want economic success just as much as the next person, our fundamental purpose in life must strive to be something greater than simple economic fulfilment.

Sebastien says

Finished this a while back been meaning to write the review.

It is excellent and in depth and sadly much of it is still perfectly relevant. Also great for anyone interested in

US history. Hofstadter's examination of religion and its role in American society is fascinating. It is by no means simple, there have been multiple factions in the religious sphere here, some were forces for enlightenment/reason/knowledge and others were anti-intellectual forces that cudgelled people with blind dogmatism and preached constant and full submission to authority. These forces waxed and waned, sometimes one gaining the upperhand over the other in the political sphere, each exerting different levels of power in various regions. There is also an interesting class angle that is intermixed within all this, the main one that comes to mind is the elite New England uppercrust religious intellectuals who held a lot of power and sway in that region and often times at the federal level. They helped establish many of the original higher level education institutions. Some fascinating dynamics between them and anti-establishment anti-elitist populist dogmatists who preached against reason and science because it didn't conform to their world-views. But they also hated the elitist New England brahmins because of their outsized power and their monopolization of the educational resources in this country.

One particularly interesting fact that Hofstadter hits: sometimes the greatest anti-intellectuals emanate from the intellectual sphere, reactionary intellectuals who might be perfectly intellectual within a broad array of subjects but in certain arenas are completely blind and retrograde. It was an interesting point and I think very true, I consider them the most pernicious because they leverage their credentials and operate from a larger platform from which they push their wacky anti-intellectual arguments. They are insiders who (sometimes) revel in torpedoing the knowledge establishment (and colleagues) from the inside. I imagine this is generally done in good faith, but sometimes I have to imagine there is jealousy or anger towards colleagues or the intellectual establishment that prompts this sort of thing. I don't know. We can all be blind to our biases, even the highest level experts and intellectuals... but these people can end up doing a lot of damage, the public seizes upon their arguments to confirm their conspiracies or push their anti-intellectual agenda.

Highly recommend this book. Hofstadter is a great writer and historian imo. The scope of this book is broad but there is a lot of nuance and in depth examination. It is not a book you read in one sitting though, best to read in slow morsels, digest, think about... Maybe it will be a grinding read for some but I found it completely spell-binding as it really got me thinking and I think helped me learn quite a bit of US history as well. Also a great examination on the philosophy of education, the US education system, attitudes towards education and knowledge, and how these have all evolved. Education and knowledge are not not very high up on the totem pole (as compared to sports and entertainment and worship of power and money). The fact that the word intellectual is still a dirty word here in this country is very telling. We face many of the same problems now that we did 50 years ago when this was written, which is really a mind-bogglingly sad fact.

Maybe we face a new dark age? I have no idea. The paradox is that we have access to more information than ever before but it seems like we only consume and accept what will reinforce narratives we already believe in (in pointing this out I'm not saying I'm immune to this myself haha! but I try to recognize and fight my tendencies but it is certainly not easy). That's why a proper approach to education and instilling critical thinking and curiosity via the education system (but also via family and community) is so important imo, it takes resources and a lot of trial and error, but we are going down the wrong path that is for sure.

Anti-intellectualism is not only an American thing. But we have a rich history of it, and its influence in our culture matters a lot given our power and influence in the world. But if we can't invest in our education system and instill curiosity, love of learning, valuing of knowledge, and an ability to appreciate and practice a certain level of critical thinking within our populace we will gradually lose power in the world. That's how I see it. We've managed to stay on top for a long time, even when our education system wasn't the best because we had a nice brain-drain going for us (along with a lot of fantastic fundamentals like a wealth of natural resources). With current policies we might end up reversing the brain-drain which we have relied upon for so long, it has masked the flaws in our education system and its classist fundamentals. If this happens the flaws of our education system will likely be magnified beyond belief, and we will all bear the economic repercussions (which are already being felt but will only get worse).

Donald Luther says

This was my second go-round on this book and in 2014, Hofstadter's treatment of American disdain for intellectuals, in particular, and for ideas, more generally, reads like a warning, a jeremiad, even, regarding the downward slide of our political and aesthetic culture. When it was first published, in the early 1960s, it called on America to close the door on McCarthyism and for the Republican Party to open its collective mind to an awareness of where it was dragging American society and American life. His perception that Americans were being dragged to the 'lowest common denominator criterion' of thought and 'technician conformity' of lifestyle would seem to have arrived with the current political impasse and cultural Know-Nothingism.

In this book, one of Hofstadter's best, he identified the causes for the suspicion that terrorizes American intellectuals and kills the imagination. He takes a historical view of where we have come from the founding of the nation by Men of the Enlightenment. He examines the Puritan strain in the American mind and its conflict with secularism in the 18th century; he goes on to the Populist stupidity of glorifying the everyman, while denouncing the expert; to the superstition of revivalist and evangelical religion (in both Great Awakenings and the 1920s and the 1950s); and looking at the beginnings of the New Left (though it didn't yet have that name when the book was published), the excessive egalitarianism of the left in the 1960s.

According to Hofstadter, his topic is a 'resentment of the life of the mind, and those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition to constantly minimize the value of that life.' While Americans, by and large, may take this view of intellectuals (certainly Hofstadter was, and considered himself, an intellectual, but he makes the point that not everyone who is university-educated is an intellectual), Hofstadter believes that Americans are more likely to prize utilitarian intelligence over the ability to deal with abstractions. At several points in this examination, Hofstadter deals with the love affair Americans have for applied science and technology versus the theoretical.

A large part of the book is taken up with the philosophy of John Dewey and the focus and purpose of American education, particularly secondary education. From the nineteenth century, when any secondary education was purposed for preparing students to enter college, to the increasing tendency to 'dumb down' secondary education which occurred in the first half of the 20th century, to the Sputnik shock, he shows that American secondary education was never really designed to prepare thoughtful citizens who could think critically. As a high school teacher for almost 30 years, I can vouch for this tendency and note that it continues today, despite any efforts by individual teachers contrarily.
