Twitter Thread by Joshua Tait

Joshua Tait
@Joshua_A_Tait

Revisiting Richard Hofstadter's essay 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt' (1955). Here are the highlights of an essay that was in many ways prescient: (thread)

Hofstadter sketches out a distinction between restrained conservatism and pseudoconservatives revolting against the present. It's a shame he drew so heavily on Adorno's research, which doesn't offer him much.

There is, however, a dynamic of dissent in America today. Representing no more than a modest fraction of the electorate, it is not so powerful as the liberal dissent of the New Deal era, but it is powerful enough to set the tone of our political life and to establish throughout the country a kind of punitive reaction. The new dissent is certainly not radical—there are hardly any radicals of any sort left—nor is it precisely conservative. Unlike most of the liberal dissent of the past, the new dissent not only has no respect for nonconformism, but is based upon a relentless demand for conformity. It can most accurately be called pseudo-conservative—I borrow the term from the study of *The Authoritarian Personality* published five years ago by Theodore W. Adorno and his associates—because its exponents, although they believe themselves to be conservatives and usually employ the rhetoric of conservatism, show signs of a serious and restless dissatisfaction with American life, traditions and institutions. They have little in common with the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word, and they are far from pleased with the dominant practical conservatism of the moment as it is represented by the Eisenhower administration. Their political reactions express rather a profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and its ways—a hatred which one would hesitate to impute to them if one did not have suggestive clinical evidence.

But this characterization of pseudoconservatives resonates deeply right now.

Who is the pseudo conservative, and what does he want? It is impossible to identify him by class, for the pseudo-conservative impulse can be found in practically all classes in society, although its power probably rests largely upon its appeal to the less educated members of the middle classes. The ideology of pseudo-conservatism can be characterized but not defined, because the pseudo-conservative tends to be more than ordinarily incoherent about politics. The lady who, when General Eisenhower's victory over Senator Taft had finally become official, stalked out of the Hilton Hotel declaiming, "This means eight more years of socialism" was probably a fairly good representative of the pseudo-conservative mentality. So also were the gentlemen who, at the Freedom Congress held at Omaha over a year ago by some "patriotic" organizations, objected to Earl Warren's appointment to the Supreme Court with the assertion: "Middle-of-the-road thinking can and will destroy us"; the general who spoke to the same group, demanding "an Air Force capable of wiping out the Russian Air Force and industry in one sweep," but also "a material reduction in military expenditures";[2] the people who a few years ago believed simultaneously that we had no business to be fighting communism in Korea, but that the war should immediately be extended to an Asia-wide crusade against communism; and the most ardent supporters of the Bricker Amendment. Many of the most zealous followers of Senator McCarthy are also pseudo-conservatives, although there are presumably a great many others who are not.

Hofstadter considers causes, but also hints at business interests (and nowadays donors) harnessing pseudoconservatism, and highlights how making money through pseudoconservatism incentivizes paranoia. Consider Alex Jones, Glenn Beck, Dinesh D'Souza and so on.

No doubt the circumstances determining the political style of any individual are complex. Although I am concerned here to discuss some of the neglected socio-psychological elements in pseudo-conservatism, I do not wish to appear to deny the presence of important economic and political causes. I am aware, for instance, that wealthy reactionaries try to use pseudo-conservative organizers, spokesmen and groups to propagate their notions of public policy, and that some organizers of pseudo-conservative and "patriotic" groups often find in this work a means of making a living—thus turning a tendency toward paranoia into a vocational asset, probably one of the most perverse forms of occupational therapy known to man. A number of other circumstances—the drastic inflation and heavy taxes of our time, the dissolution of American urban life, considerations of partisan political expediency—also play a part. But none of these things seem to explain the broad appeal of pseudo-conservatism, its emotional intensity, its dense and massive irrationality, or some of the peculiar ideas it generates. Nor will they explain why those who profit by the organized movements find such a ready following among a large number of people, and why the rank-and-file janizaries of pseudo-conservatism are so eager to hurl accusations, write letters to congressmen and editors, and expend so much emotional energy and crusading idealism upon causes that plainly bring them no material reward.

Why are pseudoconservatives obsessed by the threat of *their own government*, Hofstadter wonders.

All of us have reason to fear the power of international communism, and all our lives are profoundly affected by it. Why do some Americans try to face this threat for what it is, a problem that exists in a world-wide theater of action, while others try to reduce it largely to a matter of domestic conformity? Why do some of us prefer to look for allies in the democratic world, while others seem to prefer authoritarian allies or none at all? Why do the pseudo-conservatives express such a persistent fear and suspicion of *their own government,* whether its leadership rests in the hands of Roosevelt, Truman or Eisenhower? Why is the pseudo-conservative impelled to go beyond the more or less routine partisan argument that we have been the victims of considerable misgovernment during the past twenty years to the disquieting accusation that we have actually been the victims of persistent conspiracy and betrayal—"twenty years of treason?" Is it not true, moreover, that political types very similar to the pseudo-conservative have had a long history in the United States, and that this history goes back to a time when the Soviet power did not loom nearly so large on our mental horizons? Was the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, which was responsibly estimated to have had a membership of from 4,000,000 to 4,500,000 persons at its peak in the 1920s, a phenomenon totally dissimilar to the pseudo-conservative revolt?

Hofstadter famously and controversially answers that modernity's instability and America's complex sense of identity fuels status anxiety and conflict.

What I wish to suggest—and I do so in the spirit of one setting forth nothing more than a speculative hypothesis—is that pseudo-conservatism is in good part a product of the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life, and above all, of its peculiar scramble for status and its peculiar search for secure identity. Normally there is a world of difference between one's sense of national identity or cultural belonging and one's social status. However, in American historical development, these two things, so easily distinguishable in analysis, have been jumbled together in reality, and it is precisely this that has given such a special poignancy and urgency to our status-strivings. In this country a person's status—that is, his relative place in the prestige hierarchy of his community—and his rudimentary sense of belonging to the community—that is, what we

call his "Americanism"—have been intimately joined. Because, as a people extremely democratic in our social institutions, we have had no clear, consistent and recognizable system of status, our personal status problems have an unusual intensity. Because we no longer have the relative ethnic homogeneity we had up to about eighty years ago, our sense of belonging has long had about it a high degree of uncertainty. We boast of "the melting pot," but we are not quite sure what it is that will remain when we have been melted down.

The status politics stuff hasn't aged perfectly, as Hofstadter himself quickly realized (in this postscript), but at the time, it was a dramatically new type of analysis in addition to basic economic interests.

However, it now seems doubtful that the term "status politics," which apparently was used for the first time in this essay, is an adequate term for what I had in mind. No doubt, social status is one of the things that is at stake in most political behavior, and here the right wing is no exception. But there are other matters involved, which I rather loosely assimilated to this term, that can easily be distinguished from status, strictly defined. The term "status" requires supplementation. If we were to speak of "cultural politics" we might supply part of what is missing. In our political life there have always been certain types of cultural issues, questions of faith and morals, tone and style, freedom and coercion, which become fighting issues. To choose but one example, prohibition was an issue of

Today, I think we would talk about the previous normative certainties of race, gender, sex, religion changing over the past 60 years and the reaction to that, blasted through partisan media (which is in part a direct successor to Hofstadter's pseudoconservatives.)

Why now, Hofstadter asks. Partly because new waves of immigrants no longer provide a step up the status ladder. Today we might say the unsettling of racial, religious and gender hierarchies disrupts often white, evangelical/conservative Catholic and male status.

Why has this tide of pseudo-conservative dissent risen to such heights in our time? To a considerable degree, we must remember, it is a response, however unrealistic, to realities. We do live in a disordered world, threatened by a great power and a powerful ideology. It is a world of enormous potential violence, that has already shown us the ugliest capacities of the human spirit. In our own country there has indeed been espionage, and laxity over security has in fact allowed some spies to reach high places. There is just enough reality at most points along the line to give a touch of credibility to the melodramatics of the pseudo-conservative imagination.

Hofstadter fingers the mass media as a cause, today it is massively intensified by the participatory and personalizable nature of the Internet.

Secondly, the growth of the mass media of communication and their use in politics have brought politics closer to the people than ever before and have made politics a form of entertainment in which the spectators feel themselves involved. Thus it has become, more than ever before, an arena into which private emotions and

personal problems can be readily projected. Mass communications have aroused the mass man.

And the long period of liberal dominance, which the right now feels as sustained and total, incorporating all aspects of politics and culture.

Thirdly, the long tenure in power of the liberal elements to which the pseudo-conservatives are most opposed and the wide variety of changes that have been introduced into our social, economic and administrative life have intensified the sense of powerlessness and victimization among the opponents of these changes and have widened the area of social issues over which they feel discontent. There has been, among other things, the emergence of a wholly new struggle: the conflict between businessmen of certain types and the New Deal bureaucracy, which has spilled over into a resentment of intellectuals and experts.

Although pseudoconservatism is a small phenomenon, it has outsized influence. "In...

a populistic culture like ours, which seems to lack a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy, and in which it is possible to exploit the wildest currents of public sentiment for private purposes, it is at least conceivable that a highly organized, vocal, active and well-financed minority could create a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible.

Hofstadter sees parts of pseudoconservatism as paranoid fantasy, not a new event in history. The past four years has been a Bircherfied right. But where does this pathologizing get us, beyond catharsis? I'm not sure.

But this brings us to another aspect of the matter: at times politics becomes an arena into which the wildest fancies are projected, the most paranoid suspicions, the most absurd superstitions, the most bizarre apocalyptic fantasies. From time to time, movements arise that are founded upon the political exploitation of such fancies and fears, and while these movements can hardly aspire to animate more than a small minority of the population, they do exercise, especially in a democratic and populistically oriented political culture like our own, a certain leverage upon practical politics. Thus, today, despite the presence of issues of the utmost gravity and urgency, the American press and public have been impelled to discuss in all seriousness a right-wing movement whose leaders believe that President Eisenhower was a member of the "Communist conspiracy. It seems hardly extravagant to say that the true believers in a movement of this sort project into the arena of politics utterly irrelevant fantasies and disorders of a purely personal kind. Followers of a movement like the John Birch Society are in our world but not exactly of it. They intersect with it, they even have effects on it that could become grave, but the language they speak is a private language; they can compel the rest of us to listen to this language because they are just numerous enough, and because the structure of political influence is loose enough for them to apply a political leverage out of proportion to their numbers. They represent a kind of politics that is not exactly status politics or cultural politics, as I have defined them, but that might be called "projective politics." It involves the projection of interests and concerns, not only largely private but essentially pathological, into the public scene.

Finally, Hofstadter returns to the distinction between conservatism and pseudoconservatism. Pseudoconservatism's total opposition to compromise takes it out of the bounds of democratic politics. Instead, it is "implicit utopianism." /Fin.

Perhaps what is more to the point—though it is conjecture and not history—is that if Robert A. Taft had been nominated and elected in 1952, his administration might have been almost as disappointing to the hard core of the extreme right as Eisenhower's. The extreme right really suffers not from the policies of this or that administration, but from what America has become in the twentieth century. It suffers, moreover, from an implacable dislike and suspicion of all constituted authority. In part this is because, entertaining expectations that cannot be realized, it is bound to be dissatisfied with any regime. But still more decisive, in my opinion, is that the extreme right wing is constituted out of a public that simply cannot arrive at a psychological modus vivendi with authority, cannot reconcile itself to that combination of acceptance and criticism which the democratic process requires of the relationship between the leaders and the led. Being uncomfortable with the thought of any leadership that falls short of perfection, the extreme right is also incapable of analyzing the world with enough common sense to